

Epiphany 7, Yr. C,  
February 24, 2019

Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Luke 6:27-38

I think most of us probably found last week's reading from Luke to be pretty challenging. It was from what's called Luke's Sermon on the Plain. That sermon continues today and becomes even more challenging. Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, turn the other cheek. It's an understatement to say that Jesus is creating an entirely new way of human living. In last week's sermon, I talked about how natural it was for me to worry about my family during the tsunami in Indonesia and how thinking about, and praying for, all those others who died or were injured, was a second thought. Researchers have said that, across cultures, there's a gradation of love and concern: first it's family, then in-laws, then neighbors, then those who remind us of those preferred people. But there's little or no concern for strangers or aliens, to say nothing of enemies! Or of those who hate us or persecute us! They are most often left out of what you could call our Love Loop. Jesus is telling us to let them in.

In the first reading and the Gospel, there are themes of love, wrong-doing, forgiveness and repentance. I'd like to concentrate on the Genesis reading to look at those themes, but first just to point out a couple of things that I know we've already thought about, but which bear re-peating. The most important is that we need to remember that when Jesus is talking about love here, he's not talking about romantic love or anything similar – nothing about emotions, or warm and fuzzy feelings. Instead, he's talking about the kind of love which requires that I pray for and will, and work for, the well-being of those around me, whether I characterize them as enemies or friends. It's what we talked about last week – to be a person who is blessed means that we are a blessing to others. What Jesus is saying is that that means ALL others. No exceptions.

The story of Joseph takes up fully one-third of the book of Genesis and it brings the book of Genesis to a close. A lot of the book is about sibling rivalry – starting with Cain and Abel and so a lot of the book is about what it takes to forgive and to repent and to reconcile. Some of you may have seen the Hollywood production of the story, “Joseph and the

Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat.” I can see why they made it into a movie – it has pretty much everything in it to make a great story. So let me begin by giving you a synopsis (and by recommending, if you haven’t already done so, that you read the whole story in Genesis, since we are coming in this morning at the very end.) You’ll remember that Jacob had two wives, Leah and Rebecca. The problem starts here, because he loved Rebecca most and, by extension, the two sons that they had together, Joseph and Benjamin. There were 12 sons all together, but the other 10 were born to Leah and were loved less. You’ll also remember that Jacob didn’t try to hide his favoritism, and it’s exemplified by the many-colored coat he gives to Joseph. Apparently it was an extravagant gift; some scholars argue that what it really was was a coat with wide and flowing sleeves, such that the wearer couldn’t do any physical labor. And Joseph didn’t help the situation any. He tells his brothers that he has dreams, one in which their sheaves are all bowing down to his, one in which he’s the center and the sun, moon and stars all bow down to him. You get the picture. The plot accelerates when

Joseph is sent by his father to check on the brothers who are tending the flocks. They see him coming a long way off – what they probably see is the many-colored robe. The text points out that he's not close enough so that they can see his face. The point is that they don't really see or know Joseph at all; they only know that he's the favorite and that they hate him for it. He's the enemy.

So, they say, here comes that dreamer. Let's get rid of him. Let's kill him. One of the brothers suggests that instead, they throw him down a cistern and leave him there to die. So that's what they do. And then, a caravan headed to Egypt passes by and they have another idea: let's sell him into slavery.

So Joseph goes off to Egypt and works as a slave in the house of one of Pharaoh's high officials. Seems like all will be well, but then the mistress of the house tries to seduce him and when he refuses, she accuses him of attacking her and Joseph ends up in prison. He's stuck there until the Pharaoh has some dreams that his wise men can't interpret and someone remembers that Joseph is an interpreter of dreams. He's called from the prison, interprets the

dreams and is made the Pharaoh's right-hand man. One of the dreams was about a coming famine and because Joseph interpreted it correctly, Egypt stores grain for seven years and is well prepared. Others aren't, including Jacob's family back in Israel. He sends the 10 sons, keeping Benjamin at home, to Egypt to buy grain. When they appear before him, Joseph recognizes them right away, but they don't recognize him – once again perhaps appearances get in the way. Now instead of his father's robe, he's wearing the opulent robes of an Egyptian courtier. What's Joseph going to do? Is he going to see them as enemies and exact revenge? At first it looks like it because he accuses them of being spies and tells them that in order to prove that they aren't they have to show their loyalty by going home, getting their youngest brother, Benjamin and bringing him back with them. They do so. When they return, they're welcomed warmly; they buy the grain and leave. But they haven't gone very far when they're overtaken by the Pharaoh's guard saying that a silver goblet is missing and they are suspected of taking it. They search the saddlebags and discover it in Benjamin's belongings. Dreading

what this news will do to their father, Jacob, they offer themselves as slaves. “No,” the answer comes, “only the one who took the goblet.” And off the guards go with Benjamin. Now, Judah, the brother who suggested selling Joseph into slavery in the first place, speaks up and says that they simply can’t go home without Benjamin and he offers himself in Benjamin’s place. At that point, Joseph reveals his identity.

That’s where we come in this morning. Joseph is reassuring them that he isn’t going to take revenge, that they shouldn’t feel guilty because their behavior furthered God’s plan. And so they are reconciled.

But here’s where this text intersects with the demand, the need, to enlarge that loop of love. Rabbi Jonathon Sacks discusses this at length in his book about religious violence. He argues that we tend towards a dualism in which we see one side as all good (our friends) and the other as all evil (our enemies). And to overcome that dualism, to begin to understand others and then to see them not as enemies, but as brothers and sisters, what’s necessary is a role reversal. Imagine, he says, if a

Crusader in the 1200's or a Nazi in 1939 discovered that they were Jewish. That put me in mind of something I read a number of years ago about a Hispanic community in New Mexico, all Roman Catholics, who did one of those ancestry tests and found out that they were all Sephardic Jews. Or, in another instance, do you remember the book, *Black Like Me*, in which a white man dyes his skin and experiences, at least for a while, what it would be like to be black? Sacks' point is that we don't really understand until we find ourselves on the other side, walking in the other's shoes. Going back to Joseph's brothers: they suspected him of ambition, now they're the ones under suspicion; they sold him into slavery, now they are facing enslavement; they treated him as a stranger, now they learn that that stranger is their brother.

Sacks' argument is that the Jewish (and so the Christian) tradition recognizes that we have free will and that we sin. We have to acknowledge it when we do something wrong, express remorse and then resolve to act better – in other words, we have to REPENT. And perfect repentance, TRUE repentance is realized when we find ourselves in the

same situation and we act differently. Joseph's brothers could have left Benjamin behind, once more, in effect, "killing the favorite." But this time, they acted differently.

Repentance shows our ability to change. And if we can change then the future doesn't have to be a repeat of the past.

One final thought and it's about the word in Hebrew that means to "recognize." It can be interpreted in two directly opposite ways, like our word "sanction" which can mean either to permit or to forbid. The word used here in the text can either mean to recognize or the opposite, to be a stranger, someone who isn't recognized. The central question of Genesis, Sacks says, is this: are human beings friends or strangers, brothers and sisters or OTHERS? "Genesis is about recognition and non-recognition in the deepest sense, about the willingness to accord dignity to the other rather than see the other as a threat... (Genesis) tells us that if only we were to listen closely to the voice of the other, we would find that beneath the skin we are

brothers and sisters, members of the human family under the parenthood of God.” (*Not in God’s Name*)

I suggest that that’s what Jesus was talking about.

Amen