

The 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 24, 2019  
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Genesis 45:3-11, 15  
Psalm 37:1-9  
1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50  
Luke 6:27-38

I've been out of the country recently. (That's not news to most of you, but perhaps it is to some.) I was one of five of us who visited our sister city, Condega, in Nicaragua. I'll come back to that, because I do have a bit more to say about how our trip to Nicaragua relates to our readings this morning – and I'll certainly have a lot more to share during the weekly forum today, as well.

But first I'm reminded of another trip I took abroad, this one back in 2001. I was on a sabbatical, visiting the U.K. and Ireland, and that's how I came to be in a small city in Wales on 9/11. In the aftermath of that horrific day, I made my way to London and to a memorial set up at Grosvenor Square, near the U.S. Embassy. There, amidst the flowers and outpouring of love, someone crafted a sign and shared a well-known line by Gandhi: "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."



It struck me then – and has ever since – as a prophet's lament. And I think about the billions of dollars spent on war, the untold loss of life and limb, the damage to international goodwill. All these costs and despair and unquenched violence seem like a nightmare of our own devising.

And then I consider another well-known line, this one by our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry who has repeatedly insisted that Jesus came to help us transform our world from the nightmare it too often is into the dream God intends for it ... and for us.

I think that dream lies behind this morning's gospel. More than a set of commands or rules, I think Jesus is trying to paint an imaginative picture of how life could be if we dared dream with him. The world doesn't have to be the way it too often is. And we don't have to play by this operational program that dominates our nightmares, the one that demands an eye for eye.

And it all comes down to something as simple – seemingly simple – as love.

It's too hard – or perhaps too good – to be believed. And so Jesus begins what he has to say to us with these words, "I say to you that listen ..." Because not everyone will listen to what he has to say, convinced as they are that ours is a mechanistic universe where love deserves love and hate deserves hate and where good and bad should be repaid in proper proportion.

And yet Jesus says, "I say to you that listen, Love ..." And the word used here, *ἀγάπη*, has little, if anything to do with romance or liking or even friendship. What it means is whole-hearted desire for the well-being of the other. Nothing held back. No calculation of costs and benefits to self. No expectation of receiving anything in return. No pay-offs.

We spend too much of our time and energy focused on others – what they do or did, what they deserve. Jesus invites us to focus on ourselves – what we can do to help create a whole new world. Jesus is spelling out a promise for those of us living in the nightmare of how this world often is:

The promise, essentially, [is] that it doesn't have to be this way. That there is another option ... there is enough, more than enough – love, attention, food, worth, honor, time – to go around. That no matter how hard you play by the rules of the world you're still trapped in the death and loss that is part and parcel of this world ...

Jesus isn't offering a set of simple rules by which to get by or get ahead in this world but is inviting us into a whole other world. A world that is not about measuring and counting and weighing and competing and judging and paying back and hating and all the rest. But instead is about love. Love for those who have loved you. Love for those who haven't. Love even for those who have hated you. That love gets expressed in all kinds of creative ways, but often come through by caring – extending care and compassion and help and comfort to those in need – and forgiveness – not paying back but instead releasing one's claim on another and opening up a future where a relationship of ... love is still possible. <sup>i</sup>

For my part, I wonder if Jesus thought much about the old, old story of Joseph and his brothers.

We hear a very small part of that story. The whole of it takes up a lot of the Book of Genesis – pretty much the last third of the book. We pick it up this morning near the end. It helps to remember at least the broad outline of what came before – and how it is that Joseph came to be in a position of power in Egypt.

It was, of course, because of his brothers. Every bad thing that ever happened to Joseph happened because of them. They never liked Joseph. They threw him in a pit one day, first intending to kill him, then changing their minds and selling him off as a slave. They told their father he was dead and got on with their lives.

But Joseph did better for himself than any of his brothers could have imagined. He rose, in time, to a position of honor, serving Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. But falsely accused, he was sent to prison. Even so, Joseph eventually earned a reprieve and rose to become, in essence, second only to Pharaoh, responsible for managing all of the food of Egypt during a time of famine.

And so it is, after all these things have happened, that Joseph's brothers come to the viceroy of Egypt. They showed Joseph no mercy before, but unknowingly come begging his mercy now.

It's worth pausing to consider how the story might have continued. Joseph, with the power of life and death, can repay his brothers for every wrong turn they have done to him. After all, love deserves love, hate deserves hate, good and bad should be repaid in proper proportion.

And that's where we pick up the story this morning. Joseph loves them. He tells them who he is. He asks after their father. He sends them back home, loaded down with gifts of food and festal garments. And he invites them to come and live with him. Nothing held back. No calculation of costs and benefits to self. No expectation of receiving anything in return. No pay-offs.

The thing to consider is that the story was never about the brothers and what they deserved. It was always about Joseph and how he would choose to live and give and love.

And maybe it all has something to do with dreams replacing nightmares. After all, you may recall Joseph had a penchant for dreams. He dreamed dreams as a child. He interpreted dreams of those who were in prison with him. His facility with dreams is what brought him to Pharaoh's attention in the first place. So maybe Joseph the dreamer connected with God's dream for our world.

Jesus says, "I say to you that listen ..."

Eugene Peterson offers a fresh perspective those opening words ... and many of those that follow:

*To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person ...*

*No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.*

*... I tell you, love your enemies. Help and give without expecting a return. You'll never—I promise—regret it. Live out this God-created identity the way [God] lives toward us, generously and graciously, even when we're at our worst. [God] is kind; you be kind.*

*... Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity.*

Somewhere in all of that is a dream for us and an invitation to find another way of living in this world.

When I first began this sermon today, I said I'd come back and say a bit about our recent trip to Nicaragua. And I guess what occurs to me is that our going there offers us a glimpse into how good it is for us to give and live and love in some of the ways Jesus describes for us this morning. And in so doing, glimpse how good it is when life is for living and love is for giving.

Jesus talks about gifts we can “give without expecting a return.” And that's what happens, of course, in Condega. We give gifts and there's no way we'll ever receive that money back. But that's not why we go there, that's not why we give.

We went and we share of our abundance with those who have so little. We receive back so much gratitude for such simple gifts – such warmth and thanks for gifts we can so easily afford to give.

It was exactly one week ago – to the hour – that we sat down to lunch last Sunday afternoon with children who are deaf and their families and their teachers

At that lunch, the principal of their school thanked us. He said we help build dreams and hope and a new future. He said, in essence, we are a blessing to the people of Condega.

But some of us wonder who was more richly blessed.

*... Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing.*

What happened there? We gave, and in so doing we received back so much – “given back with bonus and blessing.” And the gift we are given is nothing less than a glimpse of God's dream for all of us and our world, a dream that has the potential to break through and transform all of the nightmares of our own devising in this world.

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose @ <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/02/epiphany-7-c-command-or-promise/>.