

Genesis 45:3-11, 15
Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42
1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50
Luke 6:27-38

Christianity is not for wimps. The practice of Christianity requires a commitment to pursue actions that go against the grain...that go against all our basic instincts and all the wisdom of the world that we have acquired. What Jesus tells us to do if we are to follow him are some of the hardest things we are ever asked to do. It's a kind of love that is tough to put into action. And yet, here we are, faithful followers of Jesus Christ wrestling with our desire to do as he asks and our instinctive and self-protective nature that calls us to do otherwise.

As we move through the season of Epiphany, we are seeing the nature of God revealed to us bit by bit. The Magi identify the infant Jesus as the incarnation of God and take another way home rather than risk having Herod find out the location of the Christ child. God intervenes through them to protect the infant Jesus. At Jesus' baptism, the dove descends on him and a voice from heaven identifies him as "My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased." At the wedding in Cana, Jesus performs his first miracle by turning water into wine and we learn about the abundant nature of God. And then we find Jesus reading the scripture passage from Isaiah in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth and we hear him claim his mission from God by bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, restoring sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free to proclaim the year of the Lord. And when he tells the hometown folks that he's going to go outside the nation of Israel...that he is going to go to *all* people, not just the Jews, he is run out of town. But we learn the universal nature of God who loves all his creations, not just a select few. And then Jesus performs his second miracle when he sends the fishermen out to drop their nets in deep water where they have fished in vain and he fills their boats up to overflowing. God's abundance is once again revealed. And then Jesus walks among the ones he has healed and tells his disciples about those who are blessed by God and those who have taken their eyes off God and missed the boat. And now on this Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, Jesus provides his disciples...and all those who listen...the game plan for living in the kingdom of God. It's not easy! It's a tough kind of love to enact.

With the announcement of those who are blessed and those to whom woe will come, it sounds as if Jesus is announcing the beginning of a revolution. Those who were listening must have been enthralled by the idea that the rich, the comfortable, the powerful, the happy would be pulled down from their places of privilege in a marvelous reversal of fortune that Jesus would initiate. We can almost feel the expectant tension in the crowd that was hanging on Jesus' every word. Things are going to be different! Jesus is going to turn the tables on everyone. Jesus is going to pull the fatcats down and elevate the downtrodden. Let's go!

But wait.....there are some qualifiers! And then he begins with the instructions for them about how they are to behave if they want to begin to taste the kingdom of God in the here and now.

Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. Give to everyone who begs from you. If someone takes something from you, don't ask for it back. Lend to others and don't expect to get it back.

Really, Jesus? Are you serious? We can't do that. None of us can do that. We don't WANT to do that. What are you talking about?

So Jesus reminds them...and us...that it's easy to love people who love us. Anybody can do that. And it's easy to lend something to someone when you know that you're going to get it back. And it's easy to do good to those who do good to us. But Jesus tells them, "Great will be your reward in heaven when you do as I instruct."

So is that why we're going to do what Jesus asks? So we can get a reward when we go to heaven? That sounds like a transactional relationship between us and God. If we do these things that Jesus is telling us to do, then God will reward us in heaven.

But our relationship with God is not transactional. God doesn't make deals with us. And woe to us who think we're going to make a deal with God. That's not how God operates. We know better.

By giving us these instructions, Jesus is revealing the nature of God to us. God is the one who does all these things. God loves us and blesses us and walks with us even when we don't love God...even when we don't thank God...even when we don't walk with God. Because while we were still in sin, he sent his only begotten Son to us so that we might be redeemed from our alienation with God and might have eternal life. God is good to us when we are God's enemy. God loves us when we don't love God back. God lets us have what we need without asking for payment. God is good to us when we are not good to God. This is the nature of God. And Jesus is asking us to pattern our own actions after that nature rather than give in to what we are prone to call our human nature...what comes naturally.

Our relationship with God is not transactional. It's not tit-for-tat. It's not, "I'll do this for you if you do this for me." Our relationship with God is a partnership. It is a relationship of reciprocity. And we get the better end of the deal. We are able to do these things that God asks only through the grace of God. And the power of that grace transforms us. As we attempt to do as Jesus has commanded us to do, we overcome those human instincts that come so naturally. We are intentional in how we respond to others and how we relate to others. We think before we act or speak. The more we try, the more God's grace comes to us. The more we practice these actions, the more they become a part of us. The reward that we get in doing as Jesus has asked us to do is in the transformation of our very selves. God's grace transforms us in ways that we can only imagine.

Jesus points his followers...that's us...toward a narrow and difficult path that is illuminated one step at a time by God's grace. And Jesus reminds us that when we do not judge, we will not be judged; and when we do not condemn, we will not be condemned; and that when we forgive, we are forgiven. For you see, the measure we give to others will be the measure we will get back. That little piece of information should give us all pause.

Jesus is inviting us into a way of life that will allow us to taste the kingdom of God in the here and now...in this life. He's giving us the guidelines. He's explaining to us how God is and how things work in God's kingdom. It's very different from the ways of the world. And when we decide that we want to follow him into this world that he is revealing to us, we will have to do a lot of practicing. Following Jesus takes some skill. It takes some intention. It needs to be laced with prayer, for we cannot do it on our own. We do it one small step or action at a time. Developing this skill in practicing Christianity is much like developing any other skill whether it's athletics or cooking or art or music. It is the practicing...over and over again....that develops that craft. It takes practice, practice, practice. Try and try again! But as we do it, no matter how hard it might be, we get better at it. Through God's grace...God's overwhelming love for us...God's mercy...we can be transformed in the most amazing way.

And we can see in the world around us...public figures as well as personal friends...the ones who are busy practicing this tough love. They are the ones who are in the midst of being transformed by God's amazing grace. And there are figures in the Bible, too, that show us how this works. This morning in our Old Testament lesson we heard the story of Joseph...Joseph with the amazing technicolor dream coat! He was ridiculed by his brothers. Teased and tortured by them. They even went so far as to throw him in a pit with the intention of leaving him there to die, but instead, they sold him to some traveling Egyptians who just happened by. God took care of the rest. Joseph rose to power in Egypt and when his brothers arrived in Egypt looking for food and a way to survive, they didn't recognize Joseph, but Joseph took care of them. Joseph had every right in the world to be furious with them all. To hate them for what they had done to him. No one would have blamed Joseph for detesting them and turning his back on them. But that's not the way Joseph reacted. When they appeared before him, not knowing who he was, Joseph didn't confront them with all the wrong they had done him. He didn't retaliate or bury them in recriminations. He forgave them completely and told them that God had actually used them to put Joseph where God wanted him to be...in Egypt and in a position of power. Who among us would have reacted that way? But hearing this story, we know that if Joseph could do it, we can do it, too. God's grace is available to all of us who look for it and ask for it. It's never too late.

This love that God has for us and that Jesus requires from us as his followers is a tough love. It's hard to do. It goes against the grain for us. It seems unrealistic and at times impossible. But we need to remember just one thing, through Him all things are possible.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.