

The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany,
Gen 45:3–11, 15; Luke 6:27–38, Ps 37:1–12, 41–42
February 24, 2019 St. George's Bolton,
Phil Hovey

In the name of God who ask of me more than I can give . . . I think.

Today's Gospel reading from Luke is a continuation from last week. It's part two of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. Now, as I was rereading the whole "sermon" I tried to imagine the disciples' responding to Jesus' words. I could even imagine their responses building in intensity as they heard each norm-busting teaching from the man they followed and revered:

"Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God;"

Preach it Jesus! (Or something like that but in Aramaic?)

"Blessed are you who are hungry, for you will be filled;"

Amen, you got it right, man.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."

Right on, I'm singin' your song, Lord

"Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."

Amen, amen, and AMEN, Brother.

"Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry."

Sing it, sing it, oh, sing it, Lord!

Woe to you who are laughing now for you will mourn and weep

Ohhh yeah, I hear your words.

I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

You're talkin' truth, man, we're with you all the . . . Wait!, WHAT?

"Love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who hurt us, pray for those who abuse us?! Come on, man, you know that's not how the world works."

"wait, WHAT?" Yeah that could be my response too. I have to say, today's part of the "Sermon on the Plain" was a tough reading for me to talk about. I think I'd scream at Jesus "how?!" "how can I?!" "how do I?!"

You know, sometimes you get a lectionary passage that is easy to talk about, one you can comfortably luxuriate in, as if it were an over-stuffed easy chair. And other times the lectionary throws you a really prickly one. This one is about as comfortable as sitting on a cactus.

Jesus says: love your enemies; turn the other cheek; if they take your coat, give them your shirt, pray for those who abuse you.

Again I ask "How can I do that?" "Why should I do that?" It just flies in the face of

what I, what we, learn growing up: retaliate, keep score, protect yourself, fight back. It's what we learned on the playground, it's what we see in the movies, it's what we see on TV, it's what we read in novels, . . . it's what we witness in the political arena:

Stand up for yourself.

If they see you taking it lying down, they'll walk all over you;

If they see you are weak, they'll do worse to you;

If they see you are an easy target, they will keep taking advantage of you.

And, you know, I'm not alone in feeling a bit discomfited by these teachings:

Phyllis Kersten, a Lutheran pastor, in her reflection in *The Christian Century* magazine on these readings notes that by and large we often simply ignore these teachings of Jesus. She comments on how we've regularly abused these texts—now and in the past. How we've used them to keep the oppressed silent, keep them in line, kept them in their place.

Denise Anderson, who is a minister in the Presbyterian church, describes in her essay in *The Christian Century* magazine that these texts—"turn the other cheek; pray for those who abuse you"—have been weaponized.

These texts have been called upon to pressure people into keeping silent or to remain in toxic environments and even remain in abusive relationships.

These texts have been used to shut down reconcilers—"Oh quit harping on wrongs in the past" "let bygones be bygones."

These texts have been misused to keep real problems from being addressed.

And, interestingly, she asks Why do these texts ask so much more of the victim than of the victimizer?

These are all good points and Anderson's question is right on— why do these teachings ask so much more of the victim than of the victimizer.

I don't have an easy answer for this. And when I do ask myself: why should I accept these teachings, is there some use to them, is there some benefit to me, all I can do is to repeat Jesus' words: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Jesus does remind us a little later in this Sermon on the Plain that there is, indeed, a benefit to us if we take his advice to heart. He says: "Your reward will be great and you'll be children of the Most High; for [God] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful as your Father is merciful."

So, how might that work? Being merciful by forgiving frees me from the emotional weight of carrying a grudge, a weight the other person, the "grudgee," may very well not be burdened with. Being freed of an onerous load is healthy for my psyche, for my spirit.

Today's psalm offers another health benefit. So with a little literary liberty:

(Follow in your bulletin Ps 37 vv 9,10)

"Refrain from anger, leave rage alone; do not fret yourself (release the tension —

breathe); it leads only to evil (and tension and anxiety and high blood pressure). For evil doers shall be cut off, (they'll not find relief) but those who wait upon the LORD shall possess the land (they'll be healthy and happy)." Nice prescription for mental health. Eh?

I think we could even write an advertisement about this: "Nine out of ten Doctors (of Theology) say 'Being merciful is good for your health.'"

Denise Anderson points out that one can be a victimizer as well as a victim.

So as I can also be the victimizer, I can benefit from receiving forgiveness and mercy! Receiving forgiveness frees me to participate in reestablishing healthy relationships. Receiving mercy is just a good for my health as offering mercy.

In the words of Christian Duquoc (a French Christian theologian): "forgiveness is an invitation to the imagination. It is not forgetfulness of the past rather it is the risk of a future other than the one imposed by the past or by memory." I want to repeat that.

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Again, Jesus' words: "Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

What a wonderful image: sitting there with a basket in your lap that is absolutely jam packed to the brim, full of goodness, even to flowing over.

Amen