

Epiphany 7 – Year C

What we have in today's Gospel from Luke is at least part of the reason Jesus gets crucified. Remember that when we get to Holy Week! This sermon by Jesus, the sermon on the level ground which began in last week's Gospel, is the explanation in greater detail of the mission statement we heard from Jesus when – in his home town of Nazareth – he read from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of God is upon me; God has sent me to bring good news to the poor..." and when he said then, "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." - That is, the kingdom of God is for here and now.

Jesus is telling us more, today, about what the kingdom, the realm, the way of God looks like. And it is the antithesis of the 'normal order' of things – both in his time and in ours. Think about it.

Jesus says, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." And what we hear all around us today is, "If someone goes after me, I'll go after them! You've got to punch them back!" Look at the trade wars, the renewed threat of the escalation of nuclear arms, the hate-mongering that seems to be worldwide!

The next words can be even more difficult to stomach: "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt." That's not how we operate. We fight back. We take people to court. – Some people have misused these words as a way of telling people who are being abused to just sit back and take it. But I have spoken before about another interpretation. The action of striking someone on their cheek is a way of mistreating a subordinate. You backhand them. But if they turn and offer the other cheek, you can no longer backhand them! And if you hand a debt collector your shirt when they come to take your coat, you expose the shame of their actions – of taking what little the poor have from them.

Something I saw from the Mindful Christianity website speaks to these words of Jesus: “Peacemaking doesn’t mean passivity. It is the act of interrupting injustice without mirroring injustice, the act of disarming evil without destroying the evildoer, the act of finding a third way that is neither fight nor flight but the careful, arduous pursuit of reconciliation and justice. It is about a revolution of love that is big enough to set both the oppressed and the oppressors free.” This is what Jesus is talking about – a revolution of love.

And it is, indeed, revolutionary. It is a *turning*- from one way of living to another. It involves a change of heart that leads to a change in practice. These words of Jesus proclaim to us that the reign of God is not meant for a heaven “light years away” – but for us to live here and now. And that message is threatening. Yes, it’s what got Jesus killed, and many who have come after him. Jesus is transgressing norms. Norms about patronage, about upholding your own virtue, or letting go of that; about who deserves privilege over others. They don’t kill Jesus because he’s weird. They kill him because he’s upsetting the norms, and that will change everything.

An article in Christian Century was talking about the challenge this message of Jesus poses. The author wrote: “A pastor had just preached on loving your enemies, working from a text in the lectionary. After the service, an elder cornered him in the hallway. He was furious and said, “I don’t think it’s appropriate to preach on that subject when our nation is at war with violent Islamic terrorism! You shouldn’t mix religion and politics!” “I’m just preaching what Jesus said,” the pastor replied. “Well,” the elder said, “I’ve always considered that a weak spot in Jesus’ teaching.”

That’s essentially what a dear old friend of mine said about this same text: “There are some things that Jesus just didn’t really mean.” - Well, he really *did* mean these things. We just don’t like to hear the parts that challenge the ways we have habitually behaved.

In his sermon, “A Knock at Midnight”, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, “Somewhere somebody must have some sense. (People) must see that force begets force, hate begets hate, toughness begets toughness. And it is all a descending spiral, ultimately ending in destruction for all and everybody. Somebody must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate and the chain of evil in the universe. And you do that by love.”

For our own benefit, then, for our own survival, it behooves us to move out of this descending spiral. If our motivation is purely selfish, if we care only about what is ours, we must do something to break the cycle of hatred.

But something greater is at stake for us, I believe. As Karoline Lewis puts it, “What’s actually at stake here is whether the kingdom of God is actually going to be present here among us.”

We pray every Sunday – and perhaps more frequently – that God’s kingdom will come on earth. The rub is that the reign of God comes through us, or it does not come. Because we are the Body of Christ now. The question is, are we embodying what the kingdom looks like?

Jesus is telling us that THIS is what the kingdom of God looks like. Loving our enemies with an Agape love that wants what is best for them. Turning our cheek and thereby interrupting injustice without mirroring injustice, disarming evil without destroying the evildoer, finding a third way that is neither fight nor flight but the careful, arduous pursuit of reconciliation and justice. A revolution of love that will set both the oppressed and the oppressors free.

“Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” A better translation is “Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.” - “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

So much of this picture of the kingdom of God is in the psalm we prayed together. Basically Psalm 37 tells us that if we live simply, practice generosity, proclaim and embody God’s will for justice, then we are living God’s way, we are living in the kingdom God. And our first reading, with its story of Joseph forgiving his brothers, being compassionate – feeling with them – gives us another glimpse of that kingdom value, another vision of what is in the heart of God.

But what we have to remember is that this heart of God is visible only when we embody it. “What’s really at stake here is whether the kingdom of God is actually going to be present here among us.”

In 1 Corinthians, Paul says, “The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.” On Ash Wednesday, we will hear those words, “remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return.” But we are a people who believe in the Incarnation – that God has entered into creation, into the very matter that God created. So let us hear those words not as a warning, so much as a reminder that, indeed, we also bear the image of the one from heaven.

From that perspective, the reason for us to end the spiral of hatred, the reason for us to live out the way of life Jesus describes that goes against the norms of society, is because that is who we are, really. Created from the heart of God, that is who we are. The kingdom of God we pray to come? We know what it looks like. Jesus tells us. Love, forgive, be compassionate, resist evil, let go of privilege. Live on the level ground. It’s all connected.

Amen.

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