

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

Sermon
By
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**“O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing:
 Send Your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love. . .”**

One thing we may have discovered from today’s gospel reading is that the “Good News” is not always easy news. In his “Sermon on the Plain,” Jesus offers his newly chosen apostles and other followers some very challenging 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.” **Really Jesus?** And, “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes your coat do not withhold even your shirt.” **Lord, you can’t be serious!** Continuing, he says “Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.” **No way!** And if that wasn’t challenging enough, Jesus states: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” **That’s mighty wishful thinking, Jesus.** But Jesus was not whistling in the dark, no, he was dead serious!

Dead serious as well, was a young man whose last words were: “Tell everyone on this train I love them.” These intriguing and baffling words were chosen as the title of a new book by author and comedian Maeve Higgins. “Tell Everyone On This Train I Love Them” are the parting words of a 23 year old man who gave his life when he and two others jumped in to help save two girls from a racist attack while on a train. What ex-

actly do these words mean? I suppose that is anyone's guess. Maeve Higgins, in an interview I recently heard on NPR about her book and its title, shared that "[these words] stopped me in my tracks. And they actually instinctively felt exactly correct to me. . . But I was also baffled because I thought like, how, in that moment of such violence - and he must have been afraid. And, like, how did he manage to feel that? . . . Like, his attacker was still on the train. Did he mean everybody?" Maeve goes on to say, "But what I took [his words] to mean was a kind of a connection between us all and the importance of love in action." So moved and transformed was she, that Maeve not only used these words as the title of her book, but also confessed that she uses them as a guide to try to love everyone she encounters on the metaphoric train she takes through life.

No, the "Good News" is not always easy news! And, when the teachings of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain are not grounded in our identity as beloved children and followers of a faithful and merciful God, they sound more like onerous, if not absurd, ethical demands by someone not really connected with reality. How could such teachings possibly further justice, equality, and wholeness in today's world we may ask? Look around, read the news. How many people would just as soon shoot or stab someone who cuts them off in traffic? How often do we see that someone shoots a person who does not look as though he or she belongs in that neighborhood? Are we surprised any more to learn that someone attacked an employee who asks him or her to comply with current guidelines regarding covid safety regulations? Is it uncommon to read that a police officer is

wounded or killed trying to enforce the laws of the community? How are we expected to love our enemies?

In Luke's gospel, Jesus comes down from the mountain to the plain, where he literally levels the playing field. Preaching to his apostles and followers, Jesus turns the current way of thinking on its head. Jesus proclaims as blessed those whom most would see as forsaken, and describes as forsaken those ordinarily regarded as blessed. Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God, blessed are the hungry, for they will be filled. Blessed are those who weep, for they will laugh. And, blessed are those who people hate, and who are excluded, reviled, and defamed on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice and leap for joy, states Jesus, "for surely your reward is great in heaven." But woe to you, says Jesus, woe to you who are rich, are full, are laughing, and when all speak well of you. You have already received your reward. **Did Jesus leave his head in the clouds one wonders?** Yet, those who have come to know the abundance of God's grace and mercy, and have been transformed by it, can have faith in even that which may at first sound totally absurd and off the wall!

Take Joseph for example, whom we encountered today in Genesis. It was a transformed Joseph who welcomed and embraced his brothers in Egypt. No longer did he regard them as the enemy who had sold him into slavery and misled their father into believing he was dead. No longer did he see himself as better than they - their father's favorite all dressed up in a fancy robe. From an early age, Joseph had become his own worst enemy, and had to first learn to love and forgive himself before he could love and

forgive others. Humbled by the ordeals brought on by his jealous brothers, Joseph had come to know first hand the mercy and faithfulness of God, who had literally delivered him from the pit where his brothers had first left him to die. It was this transformed Joseph that God was then able to use to help save the Egyptians, his brothers, and many others from hunger and famine. And now as the Pharaoh's right-hand-man, Joseph gave his brothers, who came seeking aid during the famine, a private audience, not for revenge, but so that they could be reconciled with some dignity. Recalling those moving words read earlier, "And [Joseph] kissed all his brothers and wept upon them." And after that? Well, after that his brothers could talk with him, maybe openly and honestly for the very first time!

The absurd sounding teachings of Jesus - Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." - do not sound quite so absurd if we begin to apply them close to home, beginning with ourselves, our family, and then with friends, as difficult as this may be at first. It may also help to remember that God, who is Love, loves and forgives us, the children of God, even when we do not love God, even when we act as if God is our enemy. How absurd does this sound? To Christ our Lord and teacher, not absurd at all.

The Jesus of Luke's gospel is a prophet who does not so much foretell the future as he enacts the future that is the kingdom of God. That kingdom shines brighter and brighter for all to see when we follow our Lord's example and "Do to others as [we] would have them do to [us]." Jesus spells this out for those of us who may be slow to

catch on: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged;" he states, "do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you." No, the only thing absurd about Jesus' teaching is how often we tend to forget and fall short, only then to be reminded in the most unexpected ways how totally right his teaching is.

Very early one morning a number of years ago, my wife and I boarded a subway up to Harlem in order to catch a flight back home from New York City. I was aware that to anyone native to the City, we conspicuously stood out as the naive tourists we were! After a stop or two, we observed a man stagger onto the train; a man who was disheveled and reeked of alcohol. Collapsing into a seat not far from us, he seemed to pass out, leaving a bag half open in front of him. Not long afterwards at another stop, three young men who fit our stereotype of gang members, boarded and sat across from the man now passed out. To say that our anxiety level rose a little would be an understatement. But just as we were wondering how they might react to, or take advantage of, the man across from them, or even ourselves, we witnessed one of the men reach into his pocket and pull something out. Without conversation or fanfare, he tucked a wad of cash into the man's half open bag. After another couple of stops, the three young men got off the subway and went on their way as if this was normal practice! I then had to ask myself why I was surprised, why this was not normal practice for me? "Love your enemies," "Do to others as you would have them do to you," Jesus had preached. In this moment, there was nothing absurd about these words at all, as I

could see the kingdom of God shine a little brighter, feel my anxiety level fall, and be challenged to alter my own behavior in the future.

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, with regard to the resurrection, Paul rejects the idea that the same physical body that believers possess on earth is raised. Yet he is insistent that humans are raised with some type of body. "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies," writes Paul. "And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed . . ." It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body." Paul understood, as much as anyone, that we do not enter into the kingdom of God without some kind of transformation. After all, Paul was actively pursuing and persecuting his enemies, the followers of Christ, until he met Christ Jesus on the road to Damascus. It was only then that Paul began to really understand what it meant to be a child of God, a member of the body of Christ, and to love all God's people - Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and the free. A transformed Paul went on to proclaim and practice Jesus' teachings, the "Good News," to all the Mediterranean world. No, it wasn't always easy news for others to hear; it sometimes got Paul beaten or put in prison, and eventually killed. The Gospel isn't always easy news for us to hear, and may at times even sound absurd. Absurd, that is, until through some kind of transformation and new way of life we can say, if even with our dying breath, "Tell everyone on this train I love them."