

## Seventh Sunday After Epiphany

February 20, 2022

The Rev. Rod Sprange

*"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful". Luke 6:36*

I started this sermon last Monday and put what I hoped were the finishing touches to it Friday - and by Friday of course the police action had begun in Ottawa. And Vlad the Impaler Putin had increased his megalomaniacal threats on Ukraine. And for a few minutes I wondered - is this the right sermon, given all that's going on. Is this Gospel message of loving one's enemies going to resonate at all with you this morning. But then I realized Jesus carried out his ministry, bringing the message of good news at a time when Israel was occupied by a violent and often vicious foreign nation, intent on expanding its control of the known world. It was a time when insurrections were thought to be the way to vanquish the Romans, resulting in harsh reprisals and punishments. It was a time when the wealthy and powerful were looking after themselves at the expense of the poor and vulnerable. So yes, this is the right Gospel message for today, this is exactly when we need to hear it, as challenging as it is.

If there was time, I'd love to tell you the whole story of Joseph, which is basically a prequel to the Exodus. It tells the story of how the Israelites came to be in Egypt. It is a wonderful short story, worth re-reading, and has a message that fits well with Jesus's exhortations we just heard read by Erin-Brie. Joseph, who had been at odds with his brothers ever since his father Jacob, who God had renamed Israel, had treated him differently than the others. The brothers were jealous and angry, possibly with some legitimacy. Apparently, they were so angry they had decided to kill him. Later they changed their minds and instead sold him to some slave traders who took him to Egypt. Leaping ahead to today's reading, we find Joseph has become the most important person in Egypt after Pharaoh. He had great power, and the brothers are brought before him. They are terrified of him, but they don't yet recognize who he is. Joseph had been toying with his brothers, but now, instead of exacting revenge on them, Joseph is overcome with love for them and gives them an emotional welcome. It would have been so easy for Joseph to have continued the enmity, now that he had power over them, but instead demonstrates forgiveness and love. This fits well with the message we hear as Jesus continued his sermon on the plain.

Jesus gives the crowd gathered to listen to him a way of living that was the opposite of everything they knew and had been taught and had experienced. He said "love your enemies". How can we love people who have hurt us or our families? But that is what Joseph was able to do, and it's what Jesus shares with us in his vision of the Kingdom of God. Jesus goes on to list seven more, almost impossible things for us to do, and caps them with the so called Golden Rule. He exhorts them and us to "do to others as you would have them do to you". This last is meant to be an action without any expectation that the kindness will be reciprocated. We do it not for reward, but because it is the righteous thing to do.

Jesus then explains that it's not difficult to love those who love you, or to be kind to someone who is kind to you. Even sinful people can manage to do that. So don't give yourself too much credit for doing that - don't stop though. Jesus is calling us to a much more challenging way of being. Jesus gives us a vision of a different way of being in the world, a different way of relating to everyone else. He is asking us to work at developing a generosity of spirit. In other passages he will talk about what it takes to enter or experience the Kingdom of Heaven, and to have life and have it abundantly. Experiencing that abundance of life depends on learning gratitude and radical generosity. Radical generosity towards everyone

else. It's radical because it puts others first; it's radical because it includes generosity towards even those who hate us. I know I fail more often than I succeed, but I also know that our gracious, radically generous God understands, and lovingly encourages us to keep trying.

The key to understanding just how important this first part of the passage is, is in the final sentence. "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful". Notice that Jesus is telling us what God Almighty is like - he is revealing God's character. Jesus reminds us that God is even kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. If we want to delight in God's will and walk in God's ways - then we need to try and live as Jesus says.

Think, for a minute, about why we should be grateful for God's expansive mercy. Ask yourself this question: would you prefer to receive justice or mercy? It has been said, "Justice is about getting what you deserve, mercy is about getting what you don't deserve". Jesus goes on to talk about judging, condemning and forgiving. Again, if we are grateful to God for not condemning us but forgiving us, we should demonstrate our gratitude through generosity of spirit in forgiving others, not just in words but in our hearts. "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful".

At the end of this passage Jesus offers us lovely metaphor of God's generosity, but I think it does need a little caution in interpretation. Jesus said "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". Think of the images in this description. A merchant would give the customer the minimum to fill the measure. But God's gift is not a miserly measure - but pressed in to be as full as possible, shaken together, like flour into a container, shaken so that the flour settles and you can get in as much as possible - a wonderful liquid poured, not just up to the line, but so full it runs over the brim. With God's generosity nothing is held back and there is always an abundance.

But what does Jesus mean when he says "The measure you give, will be the measure you get back". Some have thought this means, if I give money I will become rich - they preach a Gospel of Prosperity. Give your heads a shake! There is nothing in Jesus's life where he acts expecting wealth or personal gain. Jesus didn't even have a house to call his own. His generosity went so far as to die a terrible death for us and the whole world. He held nothing back. Can we say the same? What do you hold back from God? Lent is a good time to think about that - so maybe remember that next week. If we give a full measure, the measure that we will get back will be abundance of life, a sense of fulfilment, the peace and satisfaction of discovering our life has meaning.

We may never know the difference we have made in an other's life through an act of kindness or kind word at the right moment. You have probably changed someone's life by something you have said or done, and probably, you will never know. I believe that every act of kindness gathers momentum with all the other acts of kindness enacted around the world every day. Despite all that's going on around us, don't despair and ask "Why is there so much evil in the world?" Instead, ponder in wonder, and question why there is so much kindness, so much generosity, so much self-sacrifice and love in the world. Think about where that must come from? In moments of doubt, I ask myself, why does beauty exist? it isn't necessary for the continuation of the species. Why is there love and kindness? I can only find one answer, thanks be to God.

Amen