What Did He Just Say?

Luke 6:27-38, Genesis 45:4-11, 15
The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
Sunday, February 23, 2025
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I wonder if you have heard the story about the preacher who fell down a flight of stairs one Saturday night? I heard he was tripping.

I never imagined that the stairs I have walked up and down countless times over the past twenty-five years would suddenly turn into my enemy. But there I was a week ago Saturday night. I was taking the dog out when all of a sudden, I became airborne. Amazing! Like Superman! But the reality is my enemy won. I was no Superman.

Within the Old Testament, the basic definition of the word most often translated as "enemy" means "one who is being hostile." It occurs more than 270 times in the Old Testament, always referring to people of groups of people. Usually, it refers to the enemies of Israel, or anyone who seeks to fight against the people of the covenant. Enemies are those living beyond the boundaries, who exist beyond the borders. They those who seek to harm or oppress God's people—but, curiously, are often seen as those who are carrying out God's punishment on Israel for its failure to abide by God's promises.

An enemy is one who encircles, who surrounds, who captures. It is sometimes used to mean "the hating one," or the one who rises up against you. Psalm 23 captures the image of an enemy vividly, and then reminds us that even when the enemy is closing in, God is present.

"Enemy" is a particularly strong word. The Psalmist uses this word frequently, often in prayers or songs of people crying out to God for protection. The enemy is rarely named, but only remains "the other," the one who seeks to oppress, or harm. The enemy reminds Israel that without God it has no superpowers.

The New Testament Greek word for enemy is "echthros." It means essentially the same thing as the Hebrew word, except that it is most often used to refer to personal rather than national enemies. But it too means one who is hostile, who sneaks up to capture and hold you, perhaps even destroy you.

The enemy will hurt us, trip us up, damage us.

Yet did you hear what Jesus said about the enemy?

"I say to you who are listening: love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you."

Wait a second: did he say what I think he just said? Love your enemies?

Jospeh, in the Genesis story, was seen by his brothers as the enemy. They become jealous of him and the way he has attracted their father's attention. Seizing an opportunity, they throw him into a ditch, strip him of his prized coat of many colors, and sell him into slavery. He is sent to Egypt where he manages to rise through the ranks of Pharoah's servants to a position of authority. When a severe famine strikes Israel, Joseph's father and brothers come to Egypt in search of food—which is where this story begins.

Years have passed. The bruises on Joseph's back have been healed. He has risen to a place of privilege. Meanwhile, his brothers and father have fallen into desperate hunger. He sees them, and suddenly the hostility and desire for revenge fades. It's tragic when families splinter, but we all know stories of love that bring about healing.

And suddenly, Joseph loves his brothers, and he no longer sees them as enemies.

A Samaritan is walking down the highway. He sees a badly injured man, a victim of a horrible crime. The man is bruised and bleeding. He may be nearly dead. But even though the victim of this crime is Jewish, the Samaritan sees him as a neighbor, and reaches down to help the man.

And suddenly, the Samaritan, a sworn enemy to Jewish people, is no longer the enemy.

It is one thing, however, to heal rifts between siblings. It can also almost be understandable that one could be moved to show compassion to a nameless victim you do not know, a persons who is obviously no immediate threat to you. But Jesus is not just content to leave us with instructions to love our siblings, or even our neighbor. He is quite clear: "Do to others as you would have them do to you," for "if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?"

Let's be clear: an enemy is one who seeks to do us harm. To love such a person is impossible. And, while Jesus is reminding us that nothing is impossible with God, we must also be truthful in remembering loving someone does not mean putting up with abuse. We must be careful in making sure that we do not give the impression that someone who is powerless in the face of their abuser is being told by Jesus to keep putting up with abuse.

Jesus' instructions remind us that to seek love is to seek the justice which God demands. God's love is shared even with the undeserving and extends beyond our understandings of what is possible or even probable. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose life reflected these tensions, reminds us:

"But they all stood beneath the cross, enemies and believers, doubters and cowards, revilers and devoted followers. His prayer, in that hour, and his forgiveness, was meant for them all, and for all their sins. The mercy and love of God are at work even in the midst of his enemies. It is the same Jesus Christ, who of his grace calls us to follow him, and whose grace saves the murderer who mocks him on the cross in his last hour."

Jesus' instructions are hard, but they do not mean that we are called to endure abuse. Instead, they remind us of the grace of God which transforms our hearts. These words come to us from Luke's story of the sermon on the plain. It is a story much like Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, except here Jesus is speaking to the disciples and to the crowd face to face. In Matthew, Jesus' sermon is preached from a mountain, but in Luke he speaks to them "on the level." There's an immediacy and personalness about Jesus' words in Luke. It seems as if he is offering direction to those who would form the first Christian community, reminding them that the ways of discipleship and faith will never be easy. It is striking to realize that Jesus makes two assumptions of believers in this passage: one is that they will face persecution—they will have enemies. And the second is even more astonishing: they are told to love those enemies with the same unlimited love with which they have been loved.

He makes it clear. Love is expressed in active ways: "do good," "bless," "pray." He bolsters all of this with the words we know as the "Golden Rule," a religious principle well known in almost every religion.

Here on this last Sunday of Epiphany, the fullness of God's presence is made manifest. The light that has shined in the world now shines in our lives, calling us to set

aside our world's preoccupation with retaliation and revenge. Jesus' words reorient our lives from a system of contempt to the proclamation of love. "Make love your aim," wrote preacher William Sloane Coffin. "Not biblical inerrancy, not purity, nor obedience to holiness codes." Coffin quotes Paul's words to the Corinthians when he says, "I doubt if in any other scriptures of the world there is a more radical statement of ethics: if we fail in love, we fail in all things else." [1]

The promise? Give and forgive because you have been given so much. God's love is not limited, and we are called to come and swim in those powerful streams of grace.

His promise? When we show God's mercy, we shall see the kingdom of God, and our reward will be great.

Yes, that is what he actually said. Amen.

[1] William Sloan Coffin *The Heart Is a Little to the Left*.