

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

February 20, 2022

Genesis 45:3-11, 15 Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50

Luke 6:27-38

We have the privilege today of hearing more of Jesus' sermon on the plain, the one in which the gospel writer Luke gives us plain words: "It is God who is our strength," God who gives us all that we have, and Luke is telling us not to forget that. This extended sermon is our call to action, in ancient times, last week, and now. It is as if someone said to Jesus, "what are we to do when we are reviled, hated? What do we do?" In short, Jesus replies, "Love. Bless. Pray."

Love.

The word love in English means many things; here, a more accurate word would be compassion. Have compassion – we remember what compassion is: it is a word of deep feeling that comes from the gut, far down within our bodies; that we care so much we have to go that deep to find the source of our feeling. What is compassion when it is a call to action? One school of thought says that Jesus' words are hyperbole, that he does not mean literally to turn our other cheek, or give away the clothes from our back, but that we think about God's overarching, overall love for the world, and not, for example, to return an insult with another one. Hurling an insult, or a fist, or firing a gun, or dropping a bomb, is not the answer to injustice. Think as you would as a beloved child of God in God's new kingdom, that kingdom in which you are already living, that proclaims in his words.

What does that interpretation mean to a person who has suffered abuse from a spouse, loved one, family member? How does the abused person "turn the other cheek? Keep taking the abuse?" Absolutely not, (although this passage, as well as others, has been used to inflict guilt and shame on abused persons). There are other ways in which to interpret this part of Jesus' sermon. Sometimes standing is the strongest thing that one can do. Stand for yourself, and stay, if just for the moment in which you claim yourself as God's precious child. Offer the metaphorical "other cheek" by not running away in fear. Live in the moment and in every moment as if you – as you are – living in a world run by God, and that God, not by any human being, controls your life. In that standing and living, proclaiming that God is the power in one's life, the disenfranchised indeed have power; they have changed the rules of abuse and harm. Look out world, God is in charge. We need to remember that, and remember that "in the fullness of time" is most likely not an immediate gratification; a millennium is but a blink of God's eye. Do not respond in the ways of the world but in the ways of God. Do not forget that one of the ways of God on at least one occasion involved Jesus' expression of outrage outside the temple against injustices of the Temple system. Tables were overturned.

We are more loved than responding to violence with violence. We can work toward a Godly answer; we are, after all, God's very good creation.

Bless.

Blessed are the poor, not because God makes people poor, but even in the broken world that we have created, God is going to look out for us – all of us, and especially those most

disenfranchised, most far from resources and hope. In our call to action, we are called to bless those who hate us. "Bless" as a verb includes pouring out mercy, as God does for us. We give of ourselves and our lives – and expect nothing in return. It means not holding a grudge, not offering violence, not responding to evil with evil but to prayerfully consider how to be God's hands and feet – and the balm of overflowing abundance, in a world determined to live as if life is a zero sum game. Blessing is linked closely with mercy; Jesus tells us:

"Be merciful even as I am merciful. I have come to nourish your entire life with my mercy. I have come to empower you with mercy in order that you may, indeed, live a new kind of life in this world."

Pour this, from ourselves, into the world.

Pray.

Praying is not inaction. In prayer, our rapt conversation with God, we discern more closely God's will for us. One of best descriptions of prayer is the following story:

In 1965 Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish thinker, went to Selma, Alabama, to march with Martin Luther King Jr. in the struggle for civil rights. Someone marching alongside him questioned why such an eminent scholar would come to Selma instead of remaining in his ivory tower in New York. Heschel's reply was profound: "When I march in Selma, my feet are praying."

Pray with your feet. Pray with your hands. Pray with our God-created and given bodies to change the world, to arc it, however slowly, toward the kingdom of God that has already been proclaimed and in which we are living.

Lent is approaching. How might we love, bless, and pray in this season?