

“Forgiveness be with you”

I was listening to Moth Radio Hour the other day when I started thinking about what story I could tell that would get me on the program. For those who do not know the Moth Radio Hour, it is a show on public radio where people tell stories about some part of their life before a live audience. The stories can be funny, heartwarming, heartbreaking, infuriating or some combination thereof. I wonder about the people who decide to expose a part of their life in public performance. What if the audience does not respond? What if they laugh when you are serious? What if they do not laugh and it was supposed to be funny? What if they do not respond to your sense of hurt or outrage? These are audiences wanting to hear a compelling story. They also want to hear the story told well. What if you are put right after a captivating storyteller like Aesop, Homer, Jane Austin, Robin Williams, or Isabel Allende. After they smash a grand slam it could be hard to get the audience’s attention back for your story.

Storytelling is an art. The writers of Genesis were experts at this art. Nowhere is it better exhibited than in the story of Joseph and his brothers. Today we heard about how Joseph and his brothers began to reconcile. I expect some of you recall the entire narrative, but others may not. I will give you a thumbnail sketch of it.

The back story to this scene is that Joseph is the youngest of the twelve sons of Jacob (another younger son appears later). He is also Jacob’s favorite which is signified by the special coat that Jacob had made for him. Additionally, he is very annoying as little brothers can often be. He has dreams that foretell the future. In the most irritating one, his father and brothers bow down to him in respect. His brothers resent him for their father’s favoritism, the coat, and his dreams.

Later his brothers are far from home tending the flocks. Jacob sends Joseph to check on them. As he approaches the brothers decide to throw him in a pit so that he might starve, drown, or be killed by wild beasts. However, having thrown him in the pit they relent and sell him into slavery instead. In Egypt Joseph experiences some successes but also difficult trials that land him in prison.

As one might expect, Joseph has a dream while in prison that predicts an upcoming famine. Pharaoh learns of his prediction and puts Joseph in charge of preparing the kingdom for seven years of famine. Joseph proves himself up to the task and Pharaoh puts him in charge of the entire country.

It is not surprising that the famine that affects Egypt also affects the land of Canaan where Joseph’s family lives. Whenever there are famines in Canaan or Israel, people often turn to Egypt. That is what Joseph’s brothers do. When they arrive in Egypt, they encounter their long-lost brother, but they do not recognize him. They would not suspect their annoying squirt of a little brother would have achieved such an elevated position. Unbeknownst to them Joseph knows who they are right away.

After some back and forth he finally reveals his identity. The brothers now fear for their lives, they think that what they did to Joseph was unforgivable, they expect Joseph will seek revenge on them. However, Joseph does the unthinkable and forgives them. He had every right to come down hard on them, but Joseph, in his wisdom, knew forgiveness was the better course. This is especially true because he loved his father and brothers. He wanted his family back, despite what had happened. He decided for all involved it was better to forgive and move on.

In today's passage from Luke's Gospel, Jesus gives us some rules to live by. Unlike what we might hear in the Book of Proverbs, these rules are counterintuitive, radical, and downright hard to put into practice. Like Joseph, Jesus tells us to love those who have hurt us. If we are struck on the cheek, we should offer the other one also. If someone steals from us, we should offer the remainder of what we have.

We are to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, pray for those who abuse us. This seems wrongheaded, but Jesus is trying to help us. When we live in this way, we are free. When we live with anger and thoughts of revenge we allow those people who have hurt us free rent time in our heads. If we love, forgive, do good for, bless and pray for our enemies and abusers, it sets us free from the pain they have caused us. If this is not a sufficient reason to forgive do as St. Paul wrote, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." While St. Paul may want to shame his enemies, Jesus is seeking to show forgiveness and mercy. By doing so he wants to bring around our enemies to a peaceful way.

Jesus came to teach us a new way. It is a way that we are still trying to comprehend and live. He says to us that instead of looking at the other as a potential threat or enemy look at others with compassion, caring and love.

Of course, loving, feeding, and clothing our enemies can make us vulnerable. That is, vulnerable to seeing them as something other than the enemy. Likewise, when we treat those who vilify us with mercy, they can see us as friends. Turning the other cheek gives the offender the opportunity to repent as he witnesses our humility. Allowing the bully to exhaust his anger is better than escalating the situation by fighting back.

Mahatma Gandhi brought freedom to India not through a violent insurrection but through passive resistance. He refused to fight the British Empire. He resisted nonviolently instead. Civil Rights leaders in the U.S. learned from him. Their nonviolent tactics broke the back of white supremacy in the 1960s. Passive resistance was strong. Violence proved weak.

Rabbi Hillel, who was a contemporary of Jesus, said "Do not do to others what is hateful to you." Jesus turned it from a prohibition into an action. He said, "Do to others as you would have them do to you."¹ He urges us to actively love people who hate us. He commands us to feed and clothe the people we see as enemies.

As he died on the cross, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."² If the one whom we say is our Lord, Savior, and the only begotten son of God can ask that of the Father we can also. Forgiveness not only frees us from stewing on the wrongs done to us, but it also opens our hearts and minds to live in love as Jesus did.

The world needs more forgiveness and less revenge. Everyone needs more kindness, compassion and love. The essence of Jesus' ministry is to love God and love each other. It seems that until we can do that we are destined to live in the chaos of war, retribution and fear. When we can do what Jesus teaches, we have hope for a new world that provides room for everyone who want peace and love to prevail.

¹ Luke 6:31 NRSVUE

² Luke 23:34 NRSVUE