

Where Did You Get an Idea Like That?

Sermon for Sunday 2-24-2019

Gen. 45: 1-11, 15

Luke 6: 27-38

In other places and other times than today's lection, Jesus tells us – really, reminds us – to “Love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind”, to “Love our neighbor as ourself”, to “Love one another as I have loved you”. Now, just in case anybody should be left out, Jesus tells us to love our enemies. Really, Jesus? Where on earth did you get such an idea?

Well, among other places, maybe He got it from today's story about Joseph and His brothers. You see, Joseph, in the bits of the story before today's climax, proved to be reluctant as far as forgiving and forgetting. In fact, he had to spend at least 10 years learning this lesson. Really, it is God who gives the brothers good, treats them well, and gives them a future. Let me fill in the story just a bit:

Joseph, when he was young, was an arrogant so-and-so, especially toward his brothers – and at least once, toward his parents. His brothers got very tired of it, especially when Joseph, who was already the favorite, would lord it over them. He wasn't obliged to work, as they were; he spent his time reading and dreaming and being spoiled (a Biblical theme that could take up a sermon by itself...). So. When a good opportunity arose, Joseph's brothers conspired to toss him down an empty well, and leave him to die. As luck would have it, just then a trading caravan came along – one that traded in slaves as well as pots and pans and food. So they dragged Joseph back out, and sold him onto slavery, as one does. By the time of our story, Joseph has been enslaved and entrusted, born false witness against, imprisoned, freed, and at last made the king of Egypt's highest official. Joseph has suffered, seen life's ups and downs, and learned at last to trust God. Then along come his tormentors from long ago! He's a good guy, yes, and yet ... he plays with them like a cat with a mouse, while he decides what he's going to actually do with them. Prison, extortion, false accusations: many of the same things that happened to him. Now, at last, he can't stand it and can't stand himself anymore. He knows in his soul something rotten is making him behave this way. So, he does what we heard him do, and more. He brings all of Jacob, his father's, family and extended society to the best part of Egypt, where Israel will thrive through the famine and beyond, all the way to the Exodus. Joseph himself lives to be an old, satisfied, well rewarded man. All because God's intentions are not like ours. Ours are wishes and resolutions; God's are firm promises God will keep (Scott Hoezee). While God didn't cause the brothers' evil, God did allow it – and then God transformed it. Jesus knows a lot about transformation, and He actively encourages it.

Toward the end of the last century, in Africa, two major efforts to heal seemingly irreconcilable differences were made: the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions of South Africa, driven by the witness of Archbishop Desmond Tutu against the evil that was apartheid, and in Rwanda the reconciliation of Hutu and Tutsi tribes following the Rwandan massacre, mainly through local courts known as Gacaca courts. In both cases, the model of reconciliation laid out by John Lederach was front and center, reconciliation in 4 parts: peace, truth, justice, mercy. But, simultaneously, a culture of civil and human rights needed to be created. That meant no impunity, whether for individual crimes or crimes against humanity. That meant no forgetting. That meant no re-writing of history (a temptation rarely foregone in human history).

Lederach said: “reconciliation is not pursued by seeking innovative ways to disengage or minimize the conflicting groups affiliations, but instead is built on mechanisms that engage the sides of a conflict with each other, as humans-in-relationship.” The South African phrase for that is “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” – “people are people through other people”. The idea, which might seem cartoonishly idealistic, is to re-humanize everybody, together; not to segregate them. The principle is known as “Ubuntu”.

In both procedures, combatants and participants in acts of cruelty all the way up to multiple murder and worse atrocities, would tell the unvarnished truth about what they had done, and about what they had suffered. There would be some prison sentences, some community service, some monetary and other recompense. What there would not be was extra-judicial activity, blood feuds, incommensurate punishment or kangaroo courts. The three parts of the “dialogical triad” would play these parts:

The Oppressor would accept accountability (including repairs and restitution), show remorse, and offer sincere apology.

The Victim would overcome resentment and offer forgiveness (which is global, and oncludes family).

The Community would provide mechanisms of recovery.

In the end, both processes had many beautiful successes, but also had multiple breakdowns, and left many, many people unsatisfied. The major failures of both TRC and Gacaca may be laid to the sheer number, volume and horror of the matters to treat. The sheer quantity and quality of tales overwhelmed the courts, overwhelmed every timeline and deadline. Both processes led to cynicism, and both, because of how very much time passed, caused the pain of revived memories.

I bring all of this up because of a phenomenon that is again the subject of discussion in our country: reparations. Reparations for slavery, reparations for native peoples. This is the notion that in order to balance what generations of colonial and post-colonial people did in this country, oppressed and brutalized people must in some way be repaid in order to be restored.

This idea bears a strong resemblance to atonement theology, a medieval idea still going strong in many religious circles. Atonement theology holds that the sin of mankind is such an offense to God that it creates a debt mankind cannot repay. Only God could. And so, God, in Jesus, offers the repayment – His death on the cross even though He Himself is not guilty of any sin. If you think about it very long and very honestly, you'll realize it's monstrous. Luckily, it's not the only theology available to explain Jesus' redemptive role in all our lives.

You have heard me say that I believe the multiple issues of race, especially those that have been left to fester for centuries, must be dealt with for us to thrive as a unified society. I do so believe; but I also believe reparations is a loaded term, one which will assuredly create division and tension at a time when we need no more of either. I also believe there is no program of reparation that won't suffer from the faults of TRC and Gacaca; that is to say, that won't be quickly and lastingly overwhelmed, and that won't create disappointment and cynicism.

To me, a better course would be solemn, serious and complete recognition, along with the repatriation to all Americans of America's promises – all the promises. We start from where we are, but we build to where our ideals demand we go: genuine freedom and equality. We are honest, we are remorseful, and we are hopeful. Yes, it often means treating others as we have not been treated; but it was Martin Luther King who insisted that that is what we do in building the Beloved Community. We do not answer fear with fear, we do not answer violence with violence; we answer hate with love, with trust in God, with hope.

What Joseph discovered in the story we started with was the freedom to start again; in fact, to start exactly where he had failed. That is the prescription Jesus took away from this and other stories: Do not let the actions of enemies form who and what you are. Do not let the actions of friends do that, either. In all things, be formed by the imitation of God.

If only Jesus' prescription had guided our lives, in every instance of anger, of hate, of cruelty, of neglect. If only we had not let ourselves become so overwhelmed that we just push it away, believing we can never make it better, never make our life with others whole. If only we, in our every day, would observe Jesus' practices! We would not be overwhelmed, we would not be numb. We would not say of single instances "it doesn't matter; throw it on the pile". Instead, we'd resolve them. And the great, immovable piles of bad habits would stop tripping us from under the rugs where we hide them. Jesus' advice is spiritual advice, and it is practical advice, and in His own dear name we must take it.

Why? Where does this idea come from? God makes the rain to fall equally on the good and the evil. He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. If we want to think that Jesus' advice is

only for fools and chumps, we'd better think about that. We'd better think twice; because that's what we'd be calling God. After all, God's been kind to...US! TBTG.