

Pastor Thom

Sermon for February 20, 2022 – 7th Sunday after Epiphany

1 Corinthians, Chapter 15:35-38, 42-50

Luke 6:27-38

“Commit your ways to the Lord, trust in Him and He will act. He will rescue us from the wicked, He will save us, because we take our refuge in Him”. Let Us Pray

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. “Come on Jesus! That’s simply impossible, isn’t it? Don’t you know we are not perfect, we have our pride, don’t you know, and besides, why do we need to forgive when we know we are right?”

Sometimes doesn’t Jesus’ message to us seem to go too far? And yet, if we listen closely and keep an open heart, who really benefits from loving one’s enemies? Who really is blessed by forgiving, or not judging or condemning others? That’s right! It’s us! Jesus is really looking out for our own welfare. For isn’t it true – Who suffers when we choose not to forgive?; when we decide to keep hating? It’s us, isn’t it?

The heavy burdens we experience, and how resentment can fester, in the end, make us feel miserable. Forgive and you will be forgiven, give and you will be given to. How much we are willing to love will be the measure for how much we are loved. Of course, isn’t this at the heart of our first lesson and the powerful story of Joseph forgiving his brothers? To no surprise, once they realized it was their brother Joseph they were overcome with guilt at the terrible things they did to him out of jealousy. So no wonder they backed away, expecting punishment and Joseph’s revenge on them. But instead, he says those wonderful words, “Come closer to me”. He wants to show them his love and to understand that God took their wickedness and turn it into good. Because after all that had happened to Joseph through this, he was now going to be able to provide for his family and his people in Israel during the time of famine that was coming.

And Joseph goes even one step beyond forgiving them. He tells them to forgive themselves, because that’s exactly what God has done – forgiven them so that they all could be reconciled, and could finally embrace again with tears of joy. I am sure we all have witnessed the power of forgiveness, of repaying hate with love, essentially disarming our enemies by kindness and the genuine desire for mutual friendship. As Martin Luther King both said and demonstrated, the only way to turn an enemy into a friend is through love and non-violence. Still, it’s not easy when an enemy continues to choose hate or when a family member doesn’t want to be reconciled and instead wants to hang on to the anger and resentment. Who can blame us if we get twisted at times? Even now we are told that Russia is our enemy and they are the ones who are causing

all the problems with the possible invasion of Ukraine. Tensions are effecting all of us. And what can we do other than to pray? Perhaps one path is to realize that the people of Russia are not our enemy? Many, if not most, do not support President Putin. The vast majority, just like us, want peace. How many saw the two athletes, one from Russia and one from Ukraine embrace one another after both won medals? What a powerful witness that you hope was seen by the world's leaders.

Love is the way of Christ, and when we commit our ways to His, then we will be the ones who will experience refuge and peace. Sadly, love is not the way of the world, which glorifies triumphant violence, where the bad guys get what they deserve in the end. No, Jesus' way tells us that even the bad guys are God's children, even they need love and once they receive it, they too will be transformed and as God promises, the wicked will be no more. But at the heart of all of this is trust, isn't it? Trust that God knows best, trust that Jesus' way is the best way, or in fact the only way in order to live. In 2007, I organized a trip to Russia and took 42 from my previous church and family members. The primary thing we heard and experienced was just how much the Russian people loved us. They made it clear over and over again that they were not our enemies. Many had family now living in America and so upon our return, I often heard those who would tell their fellow Americans that Russians are not our enemies; They are wonderful people. In fact a vast majority are Russian Orthodox Christians and they are trying their best to follow and obey Jesus just like we are.

It was a valuable lesson to not judge or condemn others without getting to know them first. And who knows, if more and more people around the world would choose love over hate, we can only dream what will happen. But Jesus reminds us it begins with us... Love, Bless, Give, Forgive and the reward we will receive is realizing that that is exactly how God treats us. What can be more of a blessing than to know that and to be able to fully trust that God's love is both abundant and everlasting.

AMEN