

February 23 Sermon

Genesis 45:3-11, 15, Luke 6:27-38

“Love, Because We Have Been Loved”

Love because we have been loved! What a simple concept?

In his book, *Ethics*, Jim McClendon illustrates the meaning of loving our enemy. “Horace Bushnell, pastor to a congregation of New England business folk, tells of an older man who took in a partner, befriended, aided and trusted him. Then the younger betrayed that trust, used the partnership for crooked schemes, nearly ruined them. So, the senior partner lost his business and all that he had. Yet he recovered, and after some time was again prospering. The other, however, went his way from disaster to disaster. The first certainly did not forget the second; the very name brought up bitter memories, and he would cross the street rather than meet him face to face. Yet this honest man believed he should forgive.

Then there came a time when it was said the younger was destitute, and his family suffering. The older man saw it as an opportunity to express

forgiveness; anonymously, he sent money. Next the child of the younger was in trouble with the law, and the older man went to intercede; forgiveness seemed to require it. Finally, dangerous illness struck the younger man's home. There was no one else, and the first, remembering he said he forgave, went and built the fire, washed the dishes, laundered, nursed, risking infection, while his former partner sat helpless by and wept. But now, Bushnell asks, where is the reluctance, the enmity, that made the other's name hateful ...? 'You have taken his sin upon you in the cost you have borne for his sake'" (Jim McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 225ff.).

That is exactly what Christ has done for us. That is the meaning of grace. It is good news when we hear it as God's regardless love for us, but bad news when God asks us to give grace to others. But even our enemies deserve regardless love because that is the way God is and what God expects.

So, this morning, I have I've got good news and bad news this morning. The good news is that God is a God of grace. That means that God, out of God's great love, accepts us regardless. The bad news is that God is a God of grace and love, accepts us regardless. We

love, because we have been loved, regardless. That is good news!

Jonah heard it as bad news. You know the story of Jonah, how God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrians, a hated, cruel enemy of the Israelites, and preach God's regardless love. Jonah said to God, "I would rather die than have to tell the people that you love them." (Jonah 4:3)

Jonah got it right. Jonah understood better than we do. Jonah saw that God's grace is both good news and bad news. It's the regardless part that makes it so offensive. And if we are honest with ourselves this morning, we will admit that we believe that there are some people that don't deserve God's love; there are some people that we don't want God to love.

Regardless is too inclusive for us. That's what Jonah thought. There ought to be some people out of the scope of God's love. But God loves regardless. It would be easier to live with the bad news of God's regardless love if it didn't involve us. God can love anyone God chooses to love. But it does involve us. Jesus described our involvement in God's regardless love in this way, "Love your enemies."

In Genesis, we read that long before Joseph's brothers had wanted to kill him, for many reasons, some not altogether bad. Joseph was primarily a spoiled brat. He was daddy's favorite. They had to work. Joseph stayed around the house. Joseph, the youngest, the lowest man on the totem pole, wore a special coat, given to him by his father, a coat which daily rubbed the brother's faces in his undeserved and nontraditional top rank.

On top of all of that, Joseph had dreams, dreams which he delighted in retelling, dreams about how the rest of the family, nay, even the rest of the universe, would bow down to him. A day came when it was too much. The brothers wanted to do away with him. But instead of killing him, they sold him into slavery. Joseph ended up in Egypt, and the brothers thought they were done with him. Joseph's journey was just beginning. Bad news!

To understand what Jesus is saying to us this morning, we must first hear it as bad news. It is not the person who slighted us, or the one with whom we have misunderstanding, or the one who always gets chosen ahead of us that we are called to love. Jesus said,

“Love your enemies.” It is the one who has hurt us deeply and maybe is still hurting us today. Until you have that person in mind, you have not understood this text.

It is the husband who had an affair while the wife was nursing their newborn. Jesus is saying to that wife, “Love him.” It is the co-worker who spread untrue rumors that led to an unfair dismissal. Jesus says to the one dismissed, “Love your co-worker.” It is the investor who defrauded the elderly couple out of their retirement savings. Jesus says to the elderly couple, “Love the investor.” It is the neighbor who molested his neighbor’s child. Jesus says to the parents of the child, “Love the neighbor.” It is the friend who revealed confidences and ruined a reputation. Jesus says, “Love that friend.”

But how do we do that? Look again at the words of Jesus. Jesus begins by saying “But I say to you that listen.” It sets these words of Jesus in context. Jesus has just given a series of blessings and woes. Blessed are the poor – woe to the rich. Blessed is the hungry – woe to the well-fed. Blessed is those who weep – woe to those who laugh. Blessed is those who are reviled – woe to those who are praised. The poor and hungry

and oppressed would be shouting “Amen” to everything that Jesus was saying.

He then turns to those who were listening and saying, “Amen.” He turns to the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, the abused, the one who has been slapped around, the one who has lost his shirt and says, “Love your enemies.” I doubt if there was a single, “Amen.” That is not what any of us want to hear, but that is what God’s kingdom looks like.

Jesus explained that anybody can love those who are loving. Anybody can do good to those who are good. Anybody can lend to those who will reciprocate. But God’s children are to love like God, and God’s love is regardless. Love regardless that it is your enemy. Do good regardless that they have hurt you. Lend regardless that they may never repay, not because you will eventually win them by your behavior, not because you will heap coals of fire on their heads, not because you will kill them with kindness, but because that is the way God is. We love because we have been loved by a God who loves us.

Loving our enemies is a miracle. But it is a miracle that Christ calls us to. If you are not there yet, there are

some things you can do. If you can't love your enemy, Jesus says, "Do good to those who hate you." That is the place to begin. If you can't "do good" to your enemy, Jesus says, "Bless those who curse you." Maybe that is a beginning place for you. If you can't "bless" your enemy, Jesus says, "Pray for those who abuse you." That is a place that we can all begin.

Most of us believe that we have done enough if we simply leave our enemy alone. We don't wish them ill, but we don't love them either. Our enemies deserve regardless love because that is the way God is and what God expects. Jonah demonstrated several character flaws, but, despite these flaws, God's message was accomplished. God demonstrates mercy that Jonah was unwilling to extend. Like Jonah, we may feel that our enemies are necessarily God's enemies, and we blind ourselves to the fact that God cares for all of humanity, regardless of race, history, or politics. We are no more deserving of God's grace than those peoples we resent.

Joseph extending love to his brothers practiced forgiveness and reconciliation even when his brothers wronged him, choosing to prioritize family unity and compassion over seeking revenge. His brothers

deserved love, regardless, because that is the way God is and what God expects.

The good news is that God is a God of grace. That means that God, out of God's great love, accepts us regardless. We love, because we have been loved, regardless. That is good news! Amen.