

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We rarely reach these readings in our lectionary because the Season of Epiphany rarely extends to six Sundays, let alone seven. But, here we are, continuing directly from where Luke's gospel led us last Sunday.

Last week, we considered the sermon of Jesus from Luke's gospel: The Sermon on the Level Place...lightly different from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, the so-called Beatitudes found in Matthew. In Luke's verses, leading up to Chapter 6, verse 26, Jesus preaches to his disciples specifically, telling them about what I would refer to as dual citizenship.

How one can be really alive now, living in the Realm or Kingdom of God found among them...sheltered in the Peace of God that lifts one away from the fears and tribulations of the world...those that cause anguish, misery, domination, poverty, wars, and dissension. But Jesus also said that the pathway in entering the Kingdom of God is far easier and more direct by not being encumbered, weighed down, anchored...by one's personal wealth, and/or status among others, and/or the false sense of security in measured degrees of human accomplishment.

Instead, by echoing the command to set one's mind on heavenly things as opposed to earthly things, persons who have less and are less secure by the measure of the world are more likely to have hearts that seek out help from God. Are more vulnerable before God. Actually need God by virtue of their life's situation. And they are "blessed", in the words of Jesus...because they have started their life's journey. Being reborn.

Meribeth and I had vacationed in Gloucester, Massachusetts, the oldest seaport in this country dating from 1623. We met many warm and helpful people..and one of the more engaging and informative was named "Zim". Zim stood with us as we looked at various wind-driven, wooden-hulled schooners that were still wrapped up for winter. At the end of one dock, was a larger, 122- foot long schooner, named "Adventure", which he described as a ship that basically lumbered in the water and was not especially seaworthy in difficult ocean conditions. Then, closer to us...rather beat up in dry dock, and looking for a complete renovation after coming down from Maine...was an 80-foot long schooner that looked completely different with her long, graceful lines. Zim pointed out the distinction in the construction of the two vessels, and how builders learned how to design their wooden fishing ships to better withstand the harsh ocean conditions that have caused more than 5,000 sailing men from Gloucester to lose their lives over the years.

I thought of that as an analogy to this gospel. How the disciples of Jesus...them, you, me...are urged to find the courage and strength to actually be weaker, poorer, more vulnerable...to ask for God's help, for God's companionship, in living our lives on this journey, on this voyage through harsh, deadly conditions...in a vessel designed by someone else, with long, graceful lines. That was all last week.

Jesus continues his sermon in this week's verses...again, directed to his disciples: them..and us. In the ancient world, many groups believed that the community was to imitate its leader. So, this continuing sermon offers guidance in how the congregation can live and witness faithfully in its situation, considering the partial presence and final coming of the Realm or Kingdom of God.

Following Jesus may be loving but it is tough, particularly in today's gospel. His words about turning the other cheek and giving up your shirt along with your coat are demeaning, and it is likely that Jesus is speaking to those who were victims rather than victimizers, to those oppressed rather than their oppressors. It sounds like Jesus is telling victims to be quiet, to keep taking it. But acclaimed New Testament scholar Walter Wink sees it differently: that Jesus' words are a form of non-violent resistance to oppression.

In the culture of first-century Palestine, a person's left hand was used for personal bathroom functions, so you never, ever, struck a person with your left hand. If you were superior to the other, you struck them with the back of your right hand, never with the palm of your hand. If you struck with the palm of your hand, it meant you saw them as an equal. So, in what Jesus is saying, if someone strikes you on the cheek, it will most likely be with the back of their hand...remember he is talking to victims here so your oppressor will not see you as an equal. But, if you turn your face to the side, you force your oppressor to see you as an equal. Just as even your oppressor will not use his left hand, some things were simply not done.

Jesus wants us to see the almost comical situation here. Turning your face, in that time and culture, stops the aggression. Why? The oppressor's hand begins to swing but is caught in mid-air because he does not want to treat you as an equal by hitting you with open palm.

Next is giving up your shirt when your oppressor asks for your coat. In his example, it was likely that someone asks for your coat in repayment of a debt. Impoverished disciples, remember? You owe your oppressor something and, since you have no land and very little money, your oppressor asks for your very coat. There were very clear restrictions regarding the repayment of debts. You could not leave a debtor naked at sundown no matter what he or she owed. It simply was not to be done, as against every sense of decency and good order. So, Jesus sets up another strategy of resistance. If they ask for your coat, give them your shirt too. You would be standing half-naked and they would be forced to deal with this new reality you had set up. "No, no!" they would say, "I do not want your shirt. Put it back on!" They might be so disarmed that they will return your coat as well.

Jesus is not telling people to remain victims, but to find new ways of resisting evil. "Love your enemies," Jesus said, "do good to those who hate you." This is the ethic that moved The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to kneel down with many brothers and sisters before water hoses and snarling police dogs. Many people thought he was crazy. "Only violence can fight violence," they told him.

But the authorities and the oppressors did not know what to do with this kind of resistance. They knew the power of violence. They knew the powerlessness of victims who knew their place, but this

was something they had not seen before: victims who refused to be victims, victims who refused to fight back with violence, victims who claimed their place and reshaped the battle completely.

Then we read, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." We know these words as the Golden Rule. They are not unique to Jesus, not found only in Luke and Matthew but in the writings of Homer and Seneca and Philo. This is the kind of wisdom we learned in kindergarten when the teacher told us to treat other people the way we would like to be treated.

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." And do not be too impressed with yourself for being good to your friends. Anybody can do that, Jesus says. When I hear these words from Jesus now, I think about Matthew Shepherd's mother. Matthew Shepherd was brutally beaten for being gay, beaten because one man felt that he had made a pass at him. The man got a friend to help him put the young college student in his place, and the two of them beat Matthew over and over again. They tied him to a fence on a country road and left him alone in the freezing night, and by the time someone found him the next morning and got him to the hospital, there was no way to save him. Matthew died as hundreds stood in candlelight vigil outside the hospital. The two men who killed him were arrested, tried, and convicted of the brutal hate crime. Proven guilty of first-degree murder, they deserved the death penalty in the state of Wyoming. But Matthew's mother came before the judge, and asked the judge to spare the lives of these guilty men. Who can understand what she had gone through in all the agonizing months leading up to the trial? What mother could sleep with images of her beloved son tied to a fence, beaten and alone through the cold night? What sort of people could do this to another human being?

According to the world, the world in return deserves apocalyptic punishment. We see and hear it every day, particularly now in the language of divisive, tribal classification over issues of struggle of our own making, our own creations, our own imaginations. Our species centers around a world of violence, in many different forms and degrees. "Love your enemies," Jesus said, "do good to those who hate you." Matthew's mother's life was shaped by a gospel deeper than hatred, stronger than revenge. She is a witness to the power of the gospel, with a love that can change the world.

We hear the same message today from Genesis. Joseph exercised Pharaoh's generosity with his brothers as though he had never undergone any of the experiences which led him to his position. Joseph was so entirely free of any sort of resentment that he was able to imagine an entirely generous and sustained program for the reconciliation of his brothers, and act it out in such a way that they were eventually able to get the point, overcome their fear and guilt over attempted destruction of their brother, and be reconciled.

Jesus came to save us from ourselves, from our human origins in violence, opening the possibility to nothing less than a new Way to be human. A Start-over. Human Being 2.0. From this perspective, we learn who God truly is in Jesus the Messiah, and we are empowered by the Spirit to begin living into what it means to be truly human.

Again from Walter Wink, and I quote: “And this is the revelation: God is HUMAN. It is the great error of humanity to believe that it is human. We are only fragmentarily human, fleetingly human, brokenly human. We see glimpses of our humanness, we can only dream of what a more human existence and political order would be like, but we have not yet arrived at true humanness. Only God is human, and we are made in God’s image and likeness which is to say, we are capable of becoming human.”

Jesus calls us, his disciples, to be merciful as God is merciful. That the very act of Mercy is the releasing of people and circumstances from the recrimination that they deserve. His instructions in the Sermon on the Level Place show them, and us, how to put mercy into practice, as the disciples have had first-hand exposure to the Kingdom and Realm of God, the Love of God for all.

To be unforgiven and unforgiving is to be imprisoned by the lack of forgiveness. That is the true universal meaning of “setting the captives, the prisoners free”. Not just those in chains and behind bars, but all of humanity that is starved for the security of the Kingdom and Realm where it is possible to forgive, which releases both those who forgive and those who are forgiven.

And when the community gives, that is, when it lives on the basis of the Sermon on a Level Place, it will be in a position similar to the person who goes to the market for grain. The merchant fills the measuring container to the brim and shakes it down so that every cranny is filled, and then pours the overflowing grain into the apron of the buyer to carry home.

May we know and live into the ways that God pours out the power of the Kingdom and Realm on the communities of disciples that live into it, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.