

The two scriptures we heard today have to do with being kind to someone who has hurt you, who has become your enemy. Both challenge us in our living.

In the reading from Genesis, Joseph finally lets his brothers know that he is their brother, the brother they had tried to kill and then sold into slavery twenty years earlier. Later, in chapter 50, he ends up telling the brothers: You meant it for evil, but God had a good purpose in all of this, for through this God has kept you all alive. Joseph forgives his brothers, even though they had not earned it and had not asked him for forgiveness.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells those who would follow him to do more than love those who love you; instead, love your enemies and do good to those who cannot pay you back... Treat others the same way you wish they would treat you... Preacher Thomas Long suggests that in this teaching Jesus is giving us an impossible ethic, not because it is so demanding, but because it beckons us to be like God. (*Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 29, No. 1, p. 27)

Love your enemies.

Do good to those who hate you.

Pray for the happiness of those who curse you.

In the movie, "Pay It Forward," a young boy comes up with a neat idea to make the world better: Instead of paying folks back when they do you a favor, you "pay it forward," that is, you do something kind for three other persons, who are then supposed to "pay it forward" to three others each... By the end of two weeks, the boy calculated, 4,282,969 individuals would have had their lives changed by being a part of this. (Information from the "Pay It Forward" website)

The teacher in the movie suggested that this idea might be too idealistic, and we who live in this world would probably agree. Nice idea, but wouldn't work for long. I guess we often may feel the same way about Jesus' teaching: Nice to hear it read in church, but is isn't possible for long in the world, in the workplace, in our families, on our highways, even in our church.

We tend to be more comfortable with a "pay back," get-justice society. If you wrong me, it is likely that I will get a lawyer to convince you to make things right. The courts are full of folks who have decided to fight their "enemies" this way. The jails are full of folks who didn't get that far. But *sometimes*, a person chooses to act differently, a person seems to have heard "Love your enemies, do good to those who hurt you..." Even if doing so is very hard. One instance:

In the post- Civil War years when Reconstruction had failed miserably, life for the African American was often harsh and racism overt. Education for freed slaves was still quite rare. One day, a young African American man was walking to school in the town of Tuskegee, Alabama, when he passed a woman standing in her yard.

"Hey, boy, come here! Cut my wood!" The young man bristled as he realized that she was calling to him. Slowly he turned and opened the picket gate, then took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and began to chop the wood. Not only did he chop the wood, but he piled it up neatly in a stack and then left.

Unfortunately, such scenes were very common in the post-Civil War years. So this story would have been lost except for one fact: the "boy" chopping the wood that day was somebody who became well-known - George Washington Carver, head of the agricultural department at Tuskegee Institute, winner of international medals, and fellow of the Royal Society in London.

It wasn't long before the woman caught wind of who she had just been ordering around.

Humiliated and chagrined, she immediately went to Tuskegee Institute to apologize. "Please forgive me for my ignorance, Dr. Carver."

The statesman and great benefactor of the American South smiled and said, "No problem, ma'am. I don't mind chopping wood for my friends."

Word is that the lady became a champion of southern empowerment and also a very fine donor to Tuskegee Institute. (DPS, an Internet site for preachers) (pause)

Love your enemies.

Do good to those who hate you.

Pray for the happiness/well-being of those who curse you.

You must be compassionate,

just as your Father is compassionate.

Jesus called those who would follow him to do some very unusual and difficult things.

Theologian Fred Craddock suggests that Jesus asks us **not to respond to the situations at hand as much as to the character of God**. This means that whether someone treats us badly or nicely, our responses should be prompted not so much by them or what they did as by the God we worship. (Fred Craddock, *Luke*, John Knox Press, p. 90)

Professor Thomas Long offered a neat image about focusing on God and God's promises instead of the events of our lives that tempt us to strike back or get even. He was watching skaters in Rockefeller Plaza one winter, and noticed a skater who wasn't running with the normal crowd. In Long's words: "The music was playing over the loudspeakers, and most of the skaters were doing the usual thing, gliding in time with the music, staying in sync with the other skaters as they traced over and over a large oval on the ice. There was, however, one skater who was different. The crowd went round and round, but he skated freely, first this way, then that. He made figure eights and curly-cues; he lifted his hands up over his head, then stretched them gracefully out to his side. He glided forward, then backward, more dancing than merely skating. He was clearly responding, not to the crowd or the expected route, not even to the taped music blaring over the speakers, but to another song, some other pattern, another source of direction. He was strange, but beautiful...of all the skaters on the ice, he was the one who captivated the eyes of everybody who watched. ... In a similar way, Jesus' *disciples need to listen to different music, respond to another source of direction*, trace a different pattern on the world's ice." (*Pulpit Resource*, p. 29) (edited/changed by fte)

"Love your enemies, pray for those who would hurt you... "

"But Jesus, this is too hard. Have you seen what the world is like today? Did you watch the events of Charlottesville? Did you witness the van running down people in Barcelona? Do you know how

bad it hurts for a young person to be bullied?" How hard things are for so many today?

Our nation is painfully divided. We want to feel "right" in our own opinions. Unfortunately, we have fallen unto a trap, politicians and regular people, all of us, where we focus on what is WRONG with somebody else or somebody else's idea instead of seeking to solve problems and work for the good of all. If I can cut you down, maybe I'll feel better about myself, even if I don't have any ideas about how to make the world better... But that kind of feeling better about myself is NOT what Jesus has asked us to do!

"Love your enemies.... Do unto others as you would want them to do to you...." In the face of all the protests and rationalizations we may be able to come up with about why Jesus' way will not work in our society or our situations, some other words of Jesus need to be recalled: "With human beings it is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

If you listen to political talk shows these days, you can expect heated arguments. It becomes almost impossible to hear what anybody is saying. But sometimes, people listen to each other, and there seem to be honest attempts to learn and to grow, and even to forgive.

A story. The man was a Hungarian refugee -- we'll call him J. K. J. was a successful young lawyer in Hungary before the uprisings in that country in 1956. A strong believer in freedom for his country, he fought Soviet tanks in the streets of Budapest with his friends. When the uprising failed, he was forced to flee the country.

When JK arrived in the U.S. he had no money, no job, no friends. He was, however, well educated; he spoke and wrote in several languages, including English. For several months he tried to get a job in a law office, but because of his lack of familiarity with American law, he received only polite refusals. Finally, it occurred to him that with his knowledge of language he might be able to get a job with an import-export company. He selected one such company and wrote a letter to the owner.

Two weeks later he received an answer, but was hardly prepared for the negativity of the man's reply. Among other things, it said that even if they did need someone, they wouldn't hire him because he couldn't even write good English. Crushed, JK's hurt quickly turned into anger. What right did this rude, arrogant man have to tell him he couldn't write the language! The man was obviously crude and uneducated -- his letter was chock-full of grammatical errors!

JK sat down and, with great anger, wrote a scathing reply, calculated to rip the man to shreds. When he'd finished, however, as he was reading it over, his anger began to drain away. Then he remembered the biblical admonition, "A soft answer turneth away wrath." No, he wouldn't mail the letter. Maybe the man was right. English was not his native tongue. Maybe he did need further study in it. Possibly this man had done him a favor by making him realize that he did need to work harder on perfecting his English.

JK tore up the angry letter and wrote another. This time he apologized for his first letter, explained his situation, and thanked the man for pointing out his need for further study.

Two days later he received a phone call inviting him to New York for an interview. A week later he went to work for the company as a correspondent. Later, J.K. became vice president and executive

officer of the company, destined to succeed the man he had hated and sought revenge against for a fleeting moment -- and then resisted. (*Bits & Pieces*, March 31, 1994, pp. 12-15)

The message is this: We need to let *God* be the focus instead of all the aggravations and irritations and wrongs of our lives. Jesus asks us to be like God. God offers mercy where folks don't deserve it at all. God loves precisely where our love falls apart.

In the Genesis story, Joseph could have continued to torment his brothers. He could have never told them who he was, or he could have told them and then paid them back, big-time and in a powerfully mean mode. Instead, he realized something larger, so he loved the brothers who had been his enemies, and there was blessing for all the people of Israel as he made it possible for all of Jacob's people to move to Egypt, where they could eat and flourish and grow in number. The smaller picture of Joseph's situation could have allowed Joseph never to forgive his brothers. The larger perspective was to see that God had turned a terrible crime committed out of jealousy and anger into something that benefitted not only the Hebrew people, but also the Egyptian people.

With human beings, this is hard and even impossible, but with God, nothing is impossible. The situations may get better because of a loving response, or they may get worse. The important thing is that a person who chooses to respond lovingly to an enemy chooses to be obedient to God. No matter the outcome of the situation, the relationship between that person and God is strengthened. We who have decided to follow Jesus Christ are asked to let his challenges to us – love your enemies, pray for those who persecute or frighten you – be the music to which we move in our lives. A situation may be horrible, and a person may have treated you terribly, but don't let *those* things be your music. Let the promises and presence of the Living God direct your steps and lead you to the kingdom. It will be good news for you, and who knows, it may help bring peace and hope to the whole world! In Jesus' name, Amen.