

EPIPHANY SEVEN, YEAR C, FEBRUARY 20, 2022

There doesn't seem to be a day that goes by when we don't hear of people screaming at each other over the slightest of infractions. Flights are being disrupted by unruly people, road rage erupting in gun fire, all stems from the fact that we seem to have abandoned what it means to coexist communally with each other. Whether it is political discourse or pandemic related restrictions we have taken hold of the mindset that everyone is out to get us. In December, the *New York Times* ran an essay with this ironic title: "Rudeness Is on the Rise. You Got a Problem With That?" In it, the author, Jennifer Finney Boylan asks, "How do we respond to a world under stress, a culture in which the guardrails of so-called civility are gone? We all see it and lament the rise in rage and meanness and, yet at times, we even participate in it.

Then we come to today's lessons which causes us a lot of discomfort because it is all about civility, compassion and forgiveness. In many respects, it hits a nerve very deep inside all of us because it is the antithesis of everything that we want to do. Listen again to what Jesus asks of us. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Do to others as you would have them do to you... Be merciful, just as God is merciful. Do not judge; do not condemn. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you."

Our reaction is, that's all fine and good for you Jesus but you don't live in my world. How do I pray for someone who has abused me? Why would I let someone who hits me get away with it? If someone steals from me, why should I give them anything else? I prefer to be judge and jury because I don't trust the system to deliver the kind of justice that I believe in. How can I forgive someone who has done unspeakable things to me?

I think all of those questions, resonate with everyone of us. That's why the theme of retribution and forgiveness runs through all of our lessons today. In our Old Testament reading, Joseph forgives his older brothers for sending him into a lifetime of hardship: "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."

The Psalmist tells his readers to "refrain from anger, and forsake wrath," because "fretting" over evil only leads to more evil. Paul writes about "seeds" that must die before new life can emerge. These "seeds" might include our resentments, our grudges, our wounds, our prejudices? Paul reminds us that all we can do is consent to "die" to everything that hinders new life, and trust that God will raise our dishonor and weakness into wonder and power.

These readings don't leave us much wiggle room, do they? Our attitudes and actions run counter to what Jesus is calling for us to do. The truth is, we as a society, think of revenge and getting even as the right answer. Our real philosophy of life is found in bumper sticker sayings such as; I don't get mad, I get even, or to err is human, to forgive is out of the question, or do unto others before they do unto you.

We feel what Jesus asks of us is a sign of weakness and powerlessness. But it's anything but that. You see Jesus does understand the great pain and fear that fuels hatred in any society. The Romans were contemptuous of the Jewish people. They lived under restrictive, oppressive, demeaning and violent rule by the Romans. Jesus

recognized that any kind of hatred leads to death of mind, spirit, heart and one's connection to God. To combat this is to embrace love and reject hatred. But what Jesus was challenging his listeners as he challenges us is to change the system not just our circumstances.

To change the system we first have to change ourselves. That is why Jesus calls us to walk in love, to practice mercy, to refuse revenge, recrimination, and rage and even give our offenders second, third, fourth, and even hundreds of chances. But how, in God's name, do we live into this mind-boggling call? How do we even begin? Perhaps we can begin by trying a few things.

The first thing Jesus asks us to do is to be merciful. Now the word mercy probably is better understood as having compassion. It's an important distinction because mercy can be something that a superior might show a subordinate who has done something wrong as in, I'll let you off this time. But compassion causes us to literally feel with someone. It's a visceral sharing with someone else's experience – their pain – so you suffer along with that person with the hope it will move us to do something about it and to change the underlying cause. Frederick Buechner describes it this way: Compassion is sometimes the fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live in someone's else skin.

One of the first steps we have to do is to listen. Listen to their stories, listen to their pain, really listen and you might be surprised at what happens within yourself. For when we hear another's story it helps us to grow beyond our prejudices and stereotypes. But it takes a lot of work of the soul and heart. The outcome is the beginning of compassion and love. This is why Jesus calls us to overcome hatred and oppression with a radical form of resistance showing love, compassion, kindness and forgiveness even towards one's enemy. It is a sign of strength not weakness to do these things.

There's a story about a young boy, who was a teenager in 1940 when the Nazi's invaded Holland. Gerrit watched the authorities confiscate the textbooks written by Jews. Then his Jewish teachers and classmates disappeared, the family doctor and the local butcher were beaten to death. In the midst of these horrors, Gerrit's family — like so many other Dutch Christian families — sheltered Jews in their home.

Gerrit was then asked to sign a loyalty oath which he refused. So, he was sent to prison in Berlin where he underwent unbelievable torture to give them the names of the Dutch families harboring Jews. He refused. In 1945 allied bombers hit the prison and he escaped and walked home to Holland. When he arrived at his family's home he found some young children there he didn't know. When his mother explained who the children were, Gerrit stormed out of the house screaming, "They're Nazis! I won't stay under the same roof with those bastards!" His mother replied, "Yes, they are children of Nazis. But we are Christians, and we will stand with those who suffer."

All Gerrit could think of was the pain and suffering he had endured under the Nazi's hand. It took him quite some time to listen to these innocent children's story and to hear what their pain was, to have compassion for them and to come to a place where he could forgive.

With compassion comes the ability to forgive. We all know forgiveness is very difficult to achieve. Forgiveness isn't denying the offense occurred or pretending it doesn't matter or hurt. Forgiveness doesn't happen overnight either rather it's a process, sometimes arduous and messy. To choose forgiveness releases oneself from the bitterness that can consume you.

In her memoir, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes that withholding forgiveness is like you drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die. Basically, she is saying, if I'm consumed with my own pain, if I insist on striking out, no matter how well deserved my anger is, then I'm drinking poison. And the poison will kill me long before it does anything to my abusers.

The work of compassion and forgiveness is some of the hardest work we can do and it is also some of the most important work we can do in this world. The question is how do we show the world the reality of what Jesus asks of us. If we are to convince the world about the reality of the gospel, we must live the life of compassion and forgiveness in all parts of our lives.

We start by ceasing to drink the poison of incivility, hatred and bitterness. We start by listening to the stories from those that we dismiss or make us uncomfortable. We start by learning to be compassionate. That is the least we can do in following Jesus' command. The question is, are we up for it? Amen.