

Genesis 45:3-11, 15
Psalm 37:1-12, 42-42
1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50
Luke 6:27-38

Epiphany 7C
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God's Kingdom Come

Like those of you who have been a part of this community for any period of time, I am filled with Maggie. For those of you who might not know, our beloved sister Maggie Ball died just a couple of days ago. While the grief of having lost her is surely present, for me what is much more present is – well – her presence. She is not here. She is risen. And yet, Maggie is so profoundly present here.

When I began writing my sermon yesterday, after reading commentaries and doing bible studies and filling myself with the wisdom of people who know far more than I about the sermon on the plain, I could only write about Maggie. Today is not the day for her requiem homily, so I've saved much of that for another day... but I couldn't stop thinking about her as I poured over the gospel. As Luke continues Jesus' sermon on the plain and we hear deeper, more complex and demanding words from Jesus, Maggie came to mind over and over again. *Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you... love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. ... Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you.* That's Maggie, right?

Oh, I don't mean to make her holier than all of us, she was profoundly human... but a primary marker of her humanity was her absolutely pure and oh-so-simple goodness. Maggie's goodness wasn't the result of doing good things, it was a goodness God planted in her and that she, in her very straightforward and tender way, fully lived into. I'm quite sure Maggie would not have called herself an exemplary Christian, but she was. And she's a wonderful exemplar of what Jesus is trying to teach us today. Her life was never about checking off the boxes for giving or loving or doing good or not judging. She would tell you she didn't do those things nearly well enough. Maggie wasn't an exemplary Christian because she did everything right. She simply trusted in God's goodness and love, and she paid very careful attention. Whether it was to her much beloved children and grandchildren, or the flower growing through the crack in the sidewalk or getting the stitches just right on one of her beautiful quilts or wondering what would happen when she died, Maggie paid attention.

Love your enemies, turn the other cheek, forgive and you shall be forgiven, do not judge and you won't be judged, do to others what you want done to you. Those words of scripture float around in our culture and are spoken by many who never, ever read the Bible. One doesn't have to be a Christian to recognize the Golden Rule, even if you do attribute it to

Shakespeare rather than Jesus. Yes, these words are out there in the ether, but they are hard words, and they aren't easy to practice.

I recently had a conversation with a parishioner about Covid fatigue and emotional exhaustion. She said something like "I'm a traditional Episcopalian, I just want to come to church and feel better. That's hard to do when you demand things of us." I replied that I was pretty sure it was Jesus doing the demanding, and that I was simply reporting on it. And today is one of the best examples of that demanding we'll find! While I do know we need to be comforted and nourished by our gathering and our worship, I also know that the purpose of being comforted and nourished is so we will recognize that we have been made holy and set apart so that we can go out and do God's good work in the world. Like loving our enemies, doing good, being merciful as God is merciful.

These difficult and demanding words can only be taken in by Jesus' most faithful followers, and that is precisely who he is talking to at this point. Our gospel reading begins with the words "But I say to you that listen..." A better translation is "But I say to you that are still listening..." It's because Jesus recognizes the difficulty of what he is saying, and only the most committed followers will stick around to hear such demands. That said, his words don't mean our good behavior will get us the great reward, make us children of the Most High or earn us God's love and approval. There is nothing we can do to make God love us and there is nothing we can do to make God not love us. God loves us because love is who God is. Jesus isn't being prescriptive in this sermon on the plain, he is describing how we will necessarily and naturally live if our lives are steeped in God's goodness and mercy and forgiveness, all of which are incredibly radical, pretty much impossible to live out, and counter to most everything that goes on most anywhere in our world.

Think of the most odious person that ever existed.

Now, I say to you who are still listening, God loves that person just as God loves you and the ones you love, and Jesus is telling us that we are to do that too. Yep, that is definitely demanding.

What Jesus was saying to his followers then, what he's saying to us now, doesn't mean we should condone horrific behavior or unjust treatment of God's people. It is to say if there is any possibility at all that those sinners might repent, it will only be because of God's boundless and unconditional love poured out through us. It's their only hope. As it turns out, it's our only hope too. The best thing we can possibly do to help in the face of unspeakable injustice, is to pour out God's expansive and unconditional love, because that is the ONLY way God's Kingdom will become visible.

Yes, I know it sounds crazy. It's the sort of talk that got Jesus crucified. The Kingdom of God Jesus made visible was so radical and so powerful that he had to be done away with so the occupiers and oppressors could continue to occupy and oppress. That's what I mean when I say

his words weren't prescriptive. What Jesus was describing is the way his followers will live when they experience God's boundless love and mercy. It's the way his followers must live so God's Kingdom can become visible in the world.

Jesus doesn't say these things so we'll obsess over how good we are or aren't, or spend our lives focused on how many of those Golden Rule bits we can check off our list. Moralistic behavior is not the point. The point is, the evidence of God's love, of God's Kingdom come among us will only be visible when we love as God loves, without expectation, without condition, without concern for the outcome, without hope for a payback or reward. This is the sort of life Jesus wants for us and for the world. Jesus wants us to love unconditionally, not just because of what it does for the world, but also because of what it does for us.

That's why we hear from Joseph today. Joseph who dreamed dreams and couldn't stop talking about them, Joseph, who through God's redeeming grace took his place in Pharaoh's council and saved the people from starvation, Joseph who was hated so much by his jealous brothers that they sold him into slavery, Joseph who became the head of Pharaoh's household and one of the most powerful men of his time, Joseph shows up today doing just what Jesus is talking about. Even after the horrific way his brothers had treated him, Joseph turned the other cheek, did not judge, forgave as he'd been forgiven by offering his brothers unconditional love and telling them how God used the horrible things they had done, to save God's people.

"I am your brother, Joseph," he said "whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life..."

Joseph had never been perfect and in fact, he'd behaved pretty badly. So had his father Jacob, and still, God made him the father of all Israel. Jacob and Joseph are proof that God's blessing does not rest only on the ones who behave properly, but even more importantly, they show us how God redeems everything. They show us that even the worst people or the worst circumstances have within them the seeds of God's healing, reconciling and redemptive love. The Kingdom of God was made manifest in Joseph that day when he told his brothers the evil they had committed was used by God for good. He didn't say what they did was ok. But he did make it possible for them to be brothers again, for them to forgive themselves as God forgives. It's resurrection hope, and it's what the apostle Paul is talking about today.

Paul's irritation and bad attitude aside, it's not lost on me that as we grieve the death of our beloved sister Maggie, Paul speaks to us of resurrection – something we hope for and believe in, or try to, but also something we cannot begin to understand. What Paul is trying to tell us in this passage is that what we believe shapes the way we live. If we believe in the resurrection seeds of the healing, reconciling, redemptive love of God, if we believe death no longer has dominion over us, we can live into the fullness of life and love God wants for us, planting seeds of resurrection hope everywhere. That's what Maggie's life was like – she planted seeds of resurrection hope everywhere from Mongolia to Bainbridge Island. Maybe each one of us will pick up a little piece of that beautiful work Maggie did in the world, keeping her alive not just

with our stories and memories, but in the way we live our lives too.

A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; Jesus said. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back.' Jesus didn't say that because we get what we deserve. God only knows where we would be if we got what we deserved. Jesus said that because pouring out God's love and grace is what we need to be whole and what the world needs if God's Kingdom really is to come. Amen.