

The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
St. Michael's Church, February 23, 2025
The Rev. Joshua Wong

Let us pray:

Dear Jesus, you ask us sometimes to do the impossible. But we realize that it's for our own good. We realize we can not do it alone. May we with your help live a life transformed by your love. Amen.

There was a 6th Century Chinese philosopher named Lau Tzu, who once said, "A man is born gentle and weak; at his death he is hard and stiff. All things, including the grass and trees, are soft and pliable in life; and dry and brittle in death. Stiffness is thus a companion of death; flexibility a companion of life. An army that cannot yield will be defeated. A tree that cannot bend will crack in the wind. The hard and stiff will be broken; the soft and supple will prevail."

In Jesus' life, he teaches us many ways to live. This week's Gospel reading is no different. Jesus now pivots toward instruction on living a graceful human life. Just as in Lau Tzu's philosophy, Jesus' teachings asks us to bend and be transformed into new ways of living and new ways of thinking about love. His teachings about love are often not easy, since they always require us to bend in ways we may not be use to, and they always requires grace and time to learn.

This passage includes what is arguably Jesus' most well-known teaching on the "Golden Rule." Do to others as you would have them do to you is something we still carry down from the ancient world to generations of parents ever since.

Today, the "Golden Rule" has become understood as, "Treat others with the same respect you would demand for yourself," or simply, "Hey, be fair." But, Jesus didn't mean this at all, and is actually the opposite of what he had in mind.

Our First reading from Genesis is an example of this love, the pivotal scene in the Joseph story, one of the Bible's most vivid dramatization of mercy. You may remember that Joseph was sold by his brothers into Egyptian slavery. Joseph eventually becomes one of the highest officials in Pharaoh's government, and at long last, he comes face to face with his brothers—though they don't recognize him in his new role. The story goes, not only did Joseph forgive what his brothers did to him, he cared for them during the upcoming drought, so that they could survive.

As you may have noticed, both our Gospel reading and our Collect of the day speak about love—"O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing."

Love... why does Jesus speak about love while he is on earth? Love can be complicated and is probably the hardest emotion we deal with. And, maybe that's

why...a caveat before we go on is that the decision about love is personal and sometimes painful for some. Jesus is not offering simple answers nor disrespecting any pain you may be experiencing. May God speak to us personally and at our proper time.

In these short Gospel verses, Jesus tackles some of the many deep seeded complicated aspects of love. These include the relationship we have with our enemies for example, or our reactions to those who curse us, or our society responsibility of generosity towards beggars. According to the Tyndale Bible Dictionary, in Biblical days, a curse should not be confused with profanity in the modern sense, but a curse meant anything that was the opposite of blessing someone. This list may remind us of how we've been treated, but also, how we have treated others as well.

Love is the center of our relationship with God. And a reminder that God is love, a love that is not earned by our merits, but is lavished on us by grace. So how then is Jesus asking us to live? Jesus turns to this question with a stunning unexpected answer: "Love your enemies." This is where the "Golden Rule" differs from our modern interpretation to loving one another. Jesus' practice of the Golden Rule is listed in the first few verses of our Gospel reading today. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and so forth. Summing up

this series of examples, Jesus's Golden Rule is simply this: "Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return." This last part, "expecting nothing in return," is the key to the whole list of loving your enemies. Jesus challenges his listeners, including us today, to love not as a strategy for gain, a quid quo pro, but rather for the sake of love itself, just like Jesus loves us unconditionally.

Jesus' understanding of love is the opposite of our modern understanding of love. Often we think, sure, we may treat one another with kindness or respect, but only so long as it's reciprocated. I'll treat you well, but I expect the same in return. If you love me, I'll love you; if you do good to me, I'll do good to you; if you repay me later, I'll give to you now; and so on.

However, Jesus is teaching that love is not a commodity. True love, by contrast isn't an exchange, instead, it's expecting nothing in return. We invest in love to another person for the sake of investing, without seeking gain. Love is being kind to those who may never be kind in return, or we lend not expecting money in return. Love is completely free.

Four chapters later in Luke, Jesus mentions one such man who showed kindness to a stranger without expecting anything in return. In Luke 10, Jesus speaks of a good Samaritan traveling down the road who came across a hurt man laying beside the road who was earlier attacked by robbers. When the Samaritan saw the man's

condition, the Bible says, “his heart went out to him.” He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him onto his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. In the morning he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, “Take good care of him. If it costs any more, put it on my bill—I’ll pay you on my way back.” Jesus said to those listening, “Go and do the same.”

When we practice God’s definition of love, Jesus teaches us what love really is—grace. We may think of grace as the unmerited saving love of God.

Furthermore, the following verses mention how easy it is to do good to those who are good, or already have plenty, but this is not the unmerited saving love of grace. Jesus teaches us to “Be merciful, just as God is merciful.” When we love this way, we embody the image of God, this is the love we were made for.

You may wonder, why is it so hard for us to show mercy at times? At the time of the parable of the Good Samaritan, there was a social prejudice between Jews and Samaritans. In Jesus’ day, the Jewish people of Galilee and Judea shunned the Samaritans, viewing them as a mixed race who practiced an impure, half pagan religion. Contrary, the Samaritans saw themselves as the keepers of the Torah and the true descendants of Israel, from the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. The parable demonstrates how a Samaritan set aside his prejudices to help a Jew who

was in need. We may need to examine what is hindering us from showing mercy to others, is it a set of prejudice we hold onto?

Jesus says in today's Gospel, "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. Jesus' teaching of love is radical, and often may seem illogical and unrealistic.

It's so easy to judge, condemn, be unforgiving and be frugal with what we have. Many times it may come from a place of pain. Have we been hurt by others which results in us being unwilling to be generous with our love? All of us have been hurt by others, and all of us have hurt others as well. In our confession, we say, "we repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf. May God reveal what needs healing in our lives, so that we may be set free.

The love Jesus has in mind is anything but "fair." As we all know from our own relationships with people we love, fairness and reciprocity is not often what true love is. True love is respectful, it's give and take. Jesus here is recommending an extravagant generosity of mercy that benefits not the one who benefits you, but rather the one who opposes you. For Jesus, the Golden rule is a Golden love, a grace-filled way of life.

And as we live this way, as children of the God of grace, everything about following Jesus fits together in understanding God. We don't condemn others, why? because God doesn't condemn us; we live in the image of the God of love, because we were created in the image of God. We forgive others, because God first forgave us.

Like any great teaching, these verses are vulnerable to disastrous distortion. The call to "offer the other cheek," for example, or to forgive or lend without return, can be misconstrued to profit withdrawing from abusive situations. Jesus does not wish for us to be in abusive situations. Instead, true love acts to end abuse, primarily for the sake of the abused but also for the sake of the abuser, who harms himself as well as his victim. Holding abusers accountable are not only consistent with "loving our enemies", they are expressions of it.

How then shall we live in our modern life today? We should **NOT** live by the "Golden Rule," instead by a Golden Love: a love "expecting nothing in return," a love beyond fairness, and beyond exchange; instead we are called to practice the extravagant love of grace and mercy; the love we were born for, as children of the Most High.

For Joseph, he forgave his brothers and doesn't condemn, but rather comforts his brothers. Jesus doesn't condemn, but rather prays for his persecutors. And in our

everyday lives too, full as they are of struggles and challenges, may we also be full of love, full of mercy, and full of grace. The lesson of love and forgiveness is very personal. May we ask God to speak to us according to our needs and situations. Sometimes all we can do is offer a heart of love, and leave the rest to God, knowing that we may never know the outcome. And that's OK.

This week I had a meal at HomeGirl Cafe, run by Homeboy Industries in downtown L.A. On the back of a T-shirt read, "At some point people realize the greatest strength is kindness." Jesus knew why we needed to relearn what love really is.

Amen.

“But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

So, I think we answered why love? The world needs love in Jesus’ time and in our time as well. Why? “For Jesus is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Jesus continues with the idea of what credit is there if we only love those who are lovable. I’d push it further and say, what profit is there if we don’t love our enemies, what good would that bring to the world, to our relationships if we aren’t generous with our love.

Jesus gives us practical ways to love. He says, “Do not judge, do not condemn, forgive, and give and we will receive mercy as well. These directives involves us making wise decisions. Love is not being blind or codependent in each situation. Our decisions require us to make wise boundary decisions, but it must be done

with mercy and grace. Jesus love was conditional, but Jesus was fully aware of our limitations, intentions and abilities.

This aspect of love needs to be brought up in the church. Love is being wise, it's about listening to our experiences, and knowing what is healthy. Are certain relationships toxic? Then love needs boundaries.

Being non-judgemental is the practical advice Jesus gives so that we can do our part. Give without expecting anything in return. Just like the ideas behind the Beattitudes, always consider those who need love and care, without expecting anything in return, even when it goes against the norm of society. The Beattitude says, "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets."

It's so easy to judge, condemn, be unforgiving and be frugal with what we have. Many times it comes from a place of pain. All of us have been hurt by others, and all of us have hurt others. In our confession, we say, "we repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf."

Let's go on, how often do we let someone strike our cheeks (not literally), and offered them the other? Or take something from us and we offered more for them to take? Do we give to those who beg from us without conditions? Do we forgive a debt completely? And lastly, do we do to others as you would have them do to you?

It also helps for us to know the background of the times. The love message of Jesus written by Luke occurred during a time when the Christian community was vulnerable. It was written to followers who were often victims of hate and blame because they were the minorities. They followed the teachings of the Messiah, who was radical and went against the grain. Because of their allegiance to Jesus, and not Caesar, they had a lot of enemies, both by the Romans and Jews. It was common for Christians to be killed for their faith. So, this message of radical love to our enemies, it asks that they showed love for their enemies, even when they were the underdogs.

Our decisions require us to make wise boundary decisions, but it must be done with mercy and grace. Jesus' love was unconditional, but Jesus was also completely aware of other's limitations, intentions and abilities.

continues Luke's version of Jesus' sermon, with declarations of blessing for the poor, hungry, sad and outcast, and woe for the rich, well fed, happy, and admired.