

*“The Good News: Transformation through Love and Forgiveness”*

Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; Luke 6:27-38

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Message for February 20, 2022

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Several Psalms and many Proverbs divide all of humanity into two groups: the righteous and the wicked.

Certainly, in Psalms and Proverbs, and I think throughout the Bible, righteousness is a matter of relationship. Righteous people are not perfect. Righteous people are simply people who relate rightly to God - they recognize God as God. They do this by seeking to know and obey God.

So, not being in relationship, rejecting God and God’s ways - this moves a person into the “wickedness” category. The wicked reject God because the wicked want to be their own gods, and they want to do things their own way.

Today’s psalm opened with “Do not fret” - yet another of many examples throughout the Bible in which we hear, “Do not be afraid.” When we are afraid, we try to take things into our own hands. We develop all kinds of opinions about what is going on with everything and everyone else and ignore what is happening within ourselves. That is often when we are most likely going to slide into “wickedness” territory.

I must confess that at times - usually when I am stressed or afraid - I certainly attempt to run the show, to take control and pursue my own agenda, rejecting God and God’s ways. That is a wakeup call: “wicked” is a strong term, but there it is - I’ve been wicked at times - and at other moments, I’ve managed to be righteous, as described in this text.

We usually strive to do the “right” thing - we certainly have a strong narrative in this country that if we play our cards right, if we keep our noses clean, if we work really hard, all will be well. We will succeed. We will prevail. Yet, we each know by experience, this is not a guarantee.

Among other things, Psalm 37 recognizes the frustrating reality that the wicked often prosper, and the righteous often suffer. This seems unfair. The righteous try to live God’s way. The wicked reject God and live their

own way. And yet... the wicked often seem to have it better than the righteous.

There really is a psalm for every occasion, and if you have ever been punished for doing the right thing, if you're a good person who seems to always finish last... then Psalm 37 is for you.

Psalm 37 is also good spiritual medicine for just about any problem a person might have, as it provides wisdom; outlining a plan of action for experiencing the peace that passeth all understanding - a peace that transcends the circumstances we are living in these times.

Ultimately, the psalmist reveals how being in relationship with the Divine nurtures, supports, and equips us to move through what is so hard in this life. God knows us and knows what we need, and it is our task to trust that and center down into that - this calls for us to practice deep awareness because we are so often distracted, overwhelmed, and over stimulated. Many times, we attempt to meet a need within ourselves that we can't even acknowledge or name, striving to fill the emptiness. The psalmist reminds us that when we delight in God, we recognize a desire for increased intimacy with God...and God then fulfills that desire.

The challenge of practicing our connection with the Divine and living a life of discipleship is made evident in today's Gospel reading. Last week in the Gospel of Luke we heard the beginning of Jesus's Sermon on the Plain and today we hear most of the rest of it. At that point, Jesus came down from a mountain where he had been praying to God. He was speaking to a large and diverse crowd, describing the blessings for the poor and woe to the rich. Today we hear Jesus continue this sermon among the people and his disciples as he shares his wisdom about love and forgiveness.

At this point in his ministry, Jesus was giving a kind of pep talk to his disciples and those gathered. Last week we heard him say, "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." (Luke 6:22-23)

Those who pursue discipleship realize that it will not be easy. They are rejected and despised. So, Jesus follows these words with a message about "loving their enemies." The disciples' response to persecution was to be

different from society's norm. At the time, retribution was the common response when someone hurt you, abused you, or did anything to you that was unjust. It was "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" mentality that prevailed in the lives of people.

Jesus presented a new standard, a non-violent, positive approach to any form of hostility. "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."

Who among us can live up to such ideals? I know of no one, including myself. The order of our day is no different than Jesus' day. Payback is still the norm.

I do want to acknowledge that these teachings and this message are speaking to forgiveness and discipleship, but in no way are intended to dissuade people from protecting themselves or seeking safety if they are in a dangerous situation. No one should remain in an abusive situation, and as a community, we are obligated to support those who are victimized and traumatized.

Jesus's method in dealing with evil was the overcoming of evil with good. He did not punish wrong and defend right. In our time we turn to *coercion* - by law, by violence, by external moral authority, by propaganda. Jesus relied on forms of *conversion* - by rebuke, by persuasion, by individual and inward conviction, and by love.

We are living in a time when our country is intensely divided, and it seems what polarizes us is not coming to an end any time soon. We are in the midst of incredibly challenging times. Making amends with people of opposing views takes patience and compromise. Yet, this is precisely what Jesus wanted his followers to do. In fact, he even took it a step further. "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."

Jesus was advocating a behavior that is totally opposite from revenge. The "golden rule" of *doing to others as you would have them do to you* can quickly become trite or feel overly simplistic. It may sound simple, but we know that it is not easy.

Mother Teresa's "Anyway" prayer spoke to me - the deeper understanding is that regardless of others' behavior, if we are true to our relationship with God and if we are to see that of God in other people, we must create and forgive, be honest and kind, strive to be happy and to do good - anyway.

Ultimately it is about our sacred connection and commitment to God. If we "fret," if we worry about what others are doing, we get caught up in the rubble around us rather than the overarching vision of the kingdom, which as disciples, we can strive to bring to fruition.

To love our enemies prevents us from acting out of our own self-interest. It means that forgiveness is at the very core of our faith. It means that to do harm to others in any way is totally out of the question. It means that we live by a higher standard, one that leads us to a new and different world which transcends the one in which we live.

But we can't do this on our own - we need our connection and relationship to God, we need our intentional practices that help ground us in our faith, and we need our faith community - it takes all of us praying, talking together, and striving every day.

May we encourage and support one another, may we turn toward God's loving presence in times both good and bad, and may we pick ourselves up and try again when we have given in to our fears, our assumptions, and our self-interest. Amen.