Christ Episcopal Church in Columbia, Maryland
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Sunday Sermon for February 20, 2022
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But I say to you, love your enemies.

Who do you hate? Who do you hate? What a terrible question to throw at you, at us, sitting here in church. And yet, I would guess at least that when you heard the words, for some, a name, a face, a thought came up immediately. Or perhaps, you are thinking, Oh, no, I don't hate anyone! Ever. But if I were to visit other chapters in your life, scratch a little deeper, would that still be true? I know it wouldn't for me, and not even because of those who have unforgiveably wounded me, but even more because I can't forget those who have hurt the ones I love the most. And even more honestly, I suspect, at the roots, many of us would have to acknowledge that we have, maybe still do, hate ourselves, for what seem to be good reasons.

"For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing."

My alcoholic father once, when I was 18, tried to explain who he was. He quoted a poem by Delmore Schwartz, about a man trapped in a heavy bear's flesh, who the more he tried to embrace those he loved, flailed and knocked them over with his heavy paws. I couldn't hear him very well when he told me then, he was drunk. But later I wrote my dad, saying, Daddy, the heavy bear that got you, got me too.

As Luke points out this morning with his metaphor of the level field, the plane of 'the way things really are in this life', many, most of us know hatred, and wounding and violence too well.

Today we hear the absolute command Jesus gives to all who follow His Way: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. And we know, we know it is possible. But how do we get there, to forgiveness, to reconciliation, and beyond, to love.

Our Scripture lessons offer us that hope.

If we hear this morning's lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, the end story of Joseph, without hearing the whole story, it seems a miraculous moment of mercy. Joseph is overcome with love for his brothers, unable to stop the joy of being reunited, and brings them into his own great fortune, saving his family and the people Israel.

But that is denying the complexity of this resolution. If we go back into the whole Joseph saga, we find a family system so infiltrated with violence and hatred, that we might well be looking at the Godfather, parts one through five! This is a pathologically dysfunctional family system. Jacob, who sets up the discord by clearly favoring Joseph, as much as he ignores or denigrates the sons of Leah, Bilpah and Zilpah, mere 'also ran' brothers, half sibs already competing for any attention, love. The

brothers are aggressive and violent men, read the story of Shechem, who abducted their younger sister, Dinah. And their treatment of Joseph has all those strands of hatred turned into violent action.

Twenty two years later, the brothers come into Joseph's power, his absolute life and death power, and he plays with them, like a cat plays with a captured mouse before the kill. He keeps Simeon hostage after accusing them all as spies, he plants their money in the grain bags so they will be anxious, he demands the next 'favored' child, Benjamin, and then sets it up do that he can justifiably execute Ben for theft. It would be hard not to see at least the passive aggressive violence, the undercover hate at work in Joseph's actions.

And yet, at the very instant his power offers him the greatest revenge, Joseph stops. And chooses to embrace them and offer loving actions for their well being.

What turns his heart? One strand is his proclamation, that despite all of their evil intent, God has redeemed Joseph's life and that of his family by creating good, by placing Joseph exactly where he could give life instead of the death he was sent to. But, I think there is more. In the scene leading up to this one, Joseph sees his brother Judah plead for Benjamin's life, expressing his own willingness to suffer in his place, to be a willing ransom, and, acknowledging the great harm they have done to Jacob, and unwillingness to repeat their sin.

Someone once said, Forgiveness must begin with honest admission of the sin, and repentance.

Joseph can see the brokenness of Judah, the guilt of his brothers, and find that remnant of love that was always there, a boy who just wanted to be included, to be family.

Out of death, God brings life.

Luke's Gospel continues the Sermon on the Level Place, introduced last Sunday. Here Jesus puts love, the practice of God's mercy love into human behavior. To follow Jesus is to be in the reality of God's reign, God's indwelling in the present moment. Although the world deserves apocalyptic punishment for its sinful state and choice, God offers in Jesus the possibility of turning away, repentance, and reconciliation with His Way of Being. In God's realm, we are free to practice God's mercy in action.

Luke is well aware of the conflict in the present circumstance of his community - with the Romans, with the Jews, with those who understand a different view of Christ himself. But the Way of Jesus calls for a kind of non-violence beyond just passive endurance, actions which deliberately seek the good and build the good of the other, the enemy.

Jesus' statements are imperative: Love your enemy, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. These are responses that go beyond non-retaliation to a real defiance of evil itself. Be God like:" for He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Not how you feel, but what you do.

But how? Years ago, I sat in a pastoral counseling class, with a group of students, learning about group dynamics. And that day, we began to talk about what it would be, was like, to 'take off our masks' the personas we present to others every day, hiding what we know is our real self. There was one young man, he seemed so young and shiny bright to me, just starting out in his life in ministry. And someone questioned him, "Well, what would we see if you took off your mask?" And he became very quiet. And then in a low voice, "You would see me being the swamp I really am, all that disgusting dark water and hidden ugliness and anger, hate, all my weakness leaking out, distorting the life around me…

We all shut up. It was raw. Real. Awful to the pull of it in our own guts. And then, he began to sob - and Oh God, Jesus is standing in the water with me! And He's drinking it!"

When you know, know how much you are loved, you can love.