**February 24, 2019 Seventh Sunday after Epiphany**

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**Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas**

**GOSPEL Luke 6:27-28**

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the sixth chapter.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

[Jesus said:] 27“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. 30Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. 31Do to others as you would have them do to you.
  32“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. 35But 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. 36Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.
  37“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 38give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

The gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

Sometimes we can only dream of the world where we wished we lived…the life we wish we could have…Sometimes we can only dream of having the power to be our truest, fullest selves.

And Jesus…knows this. He knows it so fully.

And he also knows things we do not…about how winding and difficult the road between this kingdom…and the kin-dom of heaven…really is.

Today Jesus’ words are difficult…but they are also words of life.

Perhaps you’ve heard these words before…about loving your enemies…and always doing good…and giving away even more than people try to take from you. Maybe you’ve tried to live so meekly you’ve almost felt yourself begin to disappear…or maybe you’ve just given up your own goodness because you know you could never live like that.

But I don’t believe for a moment that the Jesus we know wants us to pour ourselves out until we are empty shells. No. Jesus’ words today are about how to live in power and promise…even in the difficult world right now…and wend our way through the twists and turns that lead to the kin-dom of God.

Today, Jesus has huddled up the huddled masses and is reading from the playbook of the powerless….or…I should say…those who *seem* powerless…because Jesus knows something that the ones who *think* they are powerful don’t. Jesus knows that every human being on earth carries the imprint of divinity…and the ones made in the image of God are never powerless…and never worthless. So Jesus tells them how to stand in their power…even when things look their worst.

He says, “When they backhand you…and try to strike you down…you don’t have to shrink into nothingness. You do not have to cower…”

Maybe you’ve heard this bit before…but it bears repeating: a little historical context for those who like that sort of thing…or…for those who don’t. Why not? If someone wanted to hit you back then…in the most insulting way possible, they would use the back of their hand to show how you were lower than they were…but if you were to stand and offer the other cheek…it changes the terms of engagement. Because to punch someone or slap them with the palm of your hand was a gesture offered in a fair fight between equals, not to inferiors.

Today, Jesus is offering strategies of creative resistance for those trying to claim power in a world that offers them very little…Jesus is offering a path of nonviolence that also refuses to accept the rules as written by the powers.

The brilliance of the strategy is this: nothing wrong-foots the unloving more than love. Nothing unsettles the powerful more than having those they deem powerless deny the truth of the imaginary box that’s been drawn for them. Nothing transforms this world more than the surprise play of love. And, ultimately, love creates a transformation that is far beyond what we could ever have dreamed.

In a way, I think this is what happens in Joseph’s story from Genesis. He’s betrayed by his jealous brothers, who couldn’t stand how fabulous he was…both his clothes and his dreams. They sold him into slavery…and through so much suffering, Joseph still has his gifts…his dreams…and somehow…somehow, even after everything…when his brothers come face to face with him again…he is able to love them. It seems impossible.

And, it should be...by every reasonable measure. Joseph would have every right to reject them or punish them or worse. But he doesn’t.

So we have Jesus’ words about loving enemies echoing back through time into Joseph’s story…Now, if you’ll indulge me…I’ll weave one more strand from the Scriptures into this work today…Yesterday we hosted a Godly Play training here. (Godly Play is the process we offer to children during our Sunday morning learning hour, as you may know.) This weekend’s training centered in the parables. Because of that, I’ve thought of both Joseph’s story and Jesus’ teaching today in a different way…especially thinking about the parable of the Good Shepherd.

You see, Jesus tells how he is the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep by name and leads them to the good green grass, and the cool refreshing water…and guides them safely through the places of danger…and will always come to find any sheep that is lost. He is not like the ordinary shepherd or hired hand who will save his own life instead of the sheep when the wolf comes hunting.

When the group wondered about the meaning of the parable together…we found ourselves wondering about the line between good and evil in the story…Especially, we found ourselves wondering about the wolf. In the story, the wolf seems to stand in for danger…for evil…for what wants to harm the shepherd’s precious sheep. But…we wondered…how does the Good Shepherd really feel about the wolf? Is there any final ending to the story where the wolf is redeemed, too? Cared for? Claimed by the shepherd?

Beyond the world of the parable, we have heard that the lion and lamb will lie down together. So, why not the wolf, too?

We might want to consign him to the shadows. But what if there is love bringing transformation beyond what we can dream…even for him? I think there is.

And, here’s why I think that might be true: because it’s been true before. We just heard it.

Joseph’s brothers…they weren’t just bad sheep…or even the hired hand who lets the sheep get eaten to save himself. They were the wolf. They were the destroyers. They were the enemy.

And somehow, God was able to put it in the heart of a dreamer to surprise them with love…and it changed everything.

Today Jesus is telling every precious child of earth that they can stand in their power…in the truth of who they really are as beloved ones of God…even if the world has tried to destroy them. We can trust in the love that changes everything to hold us. Because it is more real than anything that tries to take from us, belittle us, or harm us.

And Jesus is also showing us that…when we are the ones who believe we are more powerful than others…we might just find ourselves confronted with love and the presence of God in a way that will surprise and challenge us. And, we might yet find, by the grace of the Good Shepherd, even when we are the wolf…that the shepherd is still looking for us…to claim us and bring us out of the shadows. Thanks be to God…and may God give us ears to hear and eyes to see when the powerless ones of the world show us how we are turning away from love.

Because it is only through love that true transformation is possible. It sneaks in, unexpected…and changes everything.

And, while we sometimes get to be a part of it…it’s not up to us to execute that play…to reach that kin-dom…because even with all life’s twists and turns, *it* has already reached *us*. Love’s greatest surprise play came on a hill outside Jerusalem. When the one who had all power in the universe…gave it up on a cross…and exhaled the last breath of love…and when he did, he put the breath of life back into a universe that had forgotten how to breath…so that everyone…every precious sheep…and the hired hand…and even the wolf…everyone could live inside that love.

There is no enemy strong enough to defeat a love like that…There is no power on this earth that can strip you of the power of God’s image in which you are made…and you never have to believe anyone who tells you otherwise…and we continue to wend our way toward the unfolding of the dream that was first born in the very heart of God. Every step of the way…our hearts beating: Love. Love. Love.

So be it. Amen.