

Sermon VII Epiphany
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18, Psalm 119:33-40, Matthew 5:38-48
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This morning we hear some of the most challenging verses in all of the New Testament about how far our love must reach. If our God makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good alike, and God sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous, who are we to bestow our love on only those we deem to be deserving of it?

Having said that, it is helpful to recall the context for these sayings. The Jews in Jesus' day were under the oppressive hand of Roman occupiers. In many cases, they were the enemy and evil doers Jesus refers to here. They would remind the Jews of their superiority and dominion over them by slapping them on the cheek, taking their garments or requiring them to carry their heavy armor or backpacks one mile. As you can imagine, these actions both belittled and infuriated the Jewish populace.

On the one hand, Jesus is giving the Jews some very specific strategies for taking control back. By offering their inner garment as well, inviting a second face smack and offering to carry the load a second mile, the Roman soldiers would be flustered and knocked back on their heels. The Jewish people weren't resisting but offering to gladly oblige and do even more. They were rewriting the rules. Without the use of force, they were disarming the enemy. When the high-handed Roman behavior failed to have the intended effect, it might stop altogether. Centuries later this behavior would be called nonviolent civil disobedience and used to give other oppressed people dignity and bring an end to further injustices.

But Jesus' insistence that we not resist evil doers, give to all who ask, love and pray for our enemies – even those actively persecuting us – is not just a strategy to restore self-pride and overcome injustice. It is a call to imitate the God Jesus believes to be ceaseless love. This God, who is love, sent his son not to exact cruel revenge on evil doers but to win to God's self every person by forgiving all our evil and allowing himself to be the victim of cruelty. We, too, can end evil by letting it stop with us.

Since this morning's expressions of extravagant love are so difficult and seemingly nuts, it is essential we pray that God would, in the words of our collect this morning, send the Holy Spirit and pour love into our hearts as God's greatest gift.

The following are a couple of true stories of people who exhibited God's greatest gift.

According to the October 20, 2103, issue of the New York Times, Antonia Brenner, known to many as the “Prison Angel,” died last year at age 86. She was a twice-divorced mother of eight in the 1960’s when she left a comfortable life in Beverly Hills to begin her volunteer work with the poor in Mexico. She would eventually become a nun, and her work would later lead her to La Masa State Penitentiary, which housed convicted murderers, gang leaders, rapists and other serious felons.

She started by giving inmates basic necessities such as aspirin, blankets, toiletries and prescription eyeglasses. She helped lead prison worship services and got permission to sell inmates soda. She used the proceeds to bail out low-level offenders. If an inmate died from natural causes, illness or a gang fight, she prepared him for burial.

Shortly after taking her sacred vows at age 50, she moved into a 10 x 10 foot cell in the prison devoting herself to the men inside, the guards and the families of both. She said, “It’s different to live among people than to visit them. I have to be here with them in the middle of the night in case someone is stabbed, in case someone has an appendix attack, in case someone dies.”

It was reported that one time during a prison riot with bullets flying everywhere and tear gas filling the air, Mother Antonia walked into the middle of the mayhem and stood fearless in her habit. The fighting stopped abruptly. Inmates said she never stopped smiling.

A year after Nelson Mandela was installed as president, South Africa hosted the Rugby World Cup Tournament. Rugby was a white man’s game. While South Africa was 80 percent black, their national rugby team was 100 percent white.

As the tournament approached, a controversy arose because the team was named the Springboks – the name for a leaping gazelle thought to have racial overtones by black South Africans. Tensions mounted as demands were made for the team to change the name.

President Mandela, in a most surprising move, visited the team wearing a cap and jacket emblazoned with the Springbok image. In an interview, he acknowledged the loathing that most blacks South Africans felt for the rugby team. Then he said, “But regardless of the past, these are our boys now, and we must get behind them and support them in this tournament.”

The next day, the coach took the team to Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela had been imprisoned for 27 years. They stood in his cell and tried to imagine what his life must have been like there for all that time. They wondered how he could have left there without being filled with poison in his heart.

When the tournament started, Mandela was in the stands, this time wearing a Springbok team jersey. The team, not known for being all that good in international competition, played with

national pride, heart and courage and won game after game until reaching the finals against New Zealand, always a top contender. At the end of regulation play the score was tied. While the teams prepared for overtime, President Mandela introduced a South African children's choir. They sang an old African miner's song that was familiar to black and white South Africans alike. Soon 65,000 fans were singing together, many with tears streaming down their faces.

The home team went on to win, and blacks and whites danced together for joy in the streets for days. Who would have thought a game could help heal a nation? It happened because a wise man put himself in the middle of a conflict that could have easily led to violence, and he challenged his people to put aside their differences and be better than they thought they could be.

This morning Jesus challenges us to be better than we think we can be – to have the will and courage to find creative ways to defuse discord by refusing to follow the course of an eye for an eye or worse. It's easier to strike back than follow the difficult and demanding pathway of love. It's easier to play it safe than stick out our hand to rescue and save. It might get a little gnawed on, but that's okay.

Jesus is asking us to play by an entirely different set of rules. When we can, he won't be able to contain his smile. AMEN.