

Sunday, February 24, 2019

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)

Genesis 45.3-11, 15; 1 Corinthians 15.35-38, 42-50; Luke 6.27-38

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Today's Gospel reading can be filed under the category of "easier said than done." Or "yeah, but."

In his Sermon on the Plain, Jesus says, "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. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again" (Lk 6.27-30). These words can be a little hard to hear. And for those who have been wronged by another, by someone who now may be viewed as "enemy," these words are even harder to stomach. Particularly given the "no ifs, ands, or buts" attitude Jesus seems to have when he invites his followers to show radical love, blessing, generosity, and yes, even forgiveness, on those who have wronged or harmed us in any way. Particularly those who have wronged or harmed us in a serious enough way to warrant, in our own minds, being deemed "enemy."

Year ago, while I was curate at St. Alban's in Westwood, our parish went through a process of reconciliation, designed to come to terms with some pain that derived from past events and actions, some because of previous clergy. Pain that had ostensibly been buried, but would occasionally creep into parish life and would play out in subtle—and not-so-subtle—ways in parish dynamics. Our rector, recognizing that some of what was going on had its roots in the parish's history, brought in a team that specialized in reconciliation work. Their job was to listen to people's stories about past hurts and to help us begin to make sense of what had happened. To begin to see our history in a new light, to deal with it, and thereby be able to move on. In effect, to seek to live into what Jesus commands in today's Gospel. To seek ways that we could love those persons who might have caused damage to the parish, to try to forgive them, and to move on into a healthier future.

One thing that stuck with me from that process was the concept of "chancing the arm," which was illustrated by a story told by one of the reconciliation team members. It was a real-life event that happened in Ireland in the late 15th century. An event that was brought to life in a new way when I visited St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, Ireland, a year and a half ago.

In 1492 two Irish families, the Butlers of Ormonde and the FitzGerald of Kildare, were involved in a bitter feud. This disagreement centred around the position of Lord Deputy. Both families wanted one of their own to hold the position. In 1492 this tension broke into outright warfare and a small skirmish occurred between the two families just outside the [Dublin] city walls.

The Butlers, realising that the fighting was getting out of control, took refuge in the Chapter House of Saint Patrick's Cathedral. The FitzGerald followed them into the Cathedral and

asked them to come out and make peace. The Butlers, afraid that if they did so they would be slaughtered, refused.

As a gesture of good faith the head of the Kildare family, Gerald FitzGerald, ordered that a hole be cut in the door. He then thrust his arm through the door and offered his hand in peace to those on the other side. Upon seeing that FitzGerald was willing to risk his arm by putting it through the door the Butlers reasoned that he was serious in his intention. They shook hands through the door, the Butlers emerged from the Chapter House and the two families made peace.

Today this door is known as the “Door of Reconciliation” and is on display in the Cathedral’s north transept. This story also lives on in a famous expression in Ireland “To chance your arm.” (<https://www.stpatrickscathedral.ie/the-door-of-reconciliation/>)

What this historic event, the Door of Reconciliation, and the resulting concept of “chancing the arm” illustrate are the hope and promise that reconciliation can bring. To be sure, they also illustrate the potential dangers involved in seeking reconciliation. One can attempt to live Jesus’ command in today’s Gospel to love our enemies and to seek to forgive them, to seek reconciliation, and meet with resistance. In extreme situations, such as the story of the Butlers and the FitzGeralds, such attempts at reconciliation may even bring the threat of bodily harm, even death. Not likely for any of us seeking reconciliation, but you get the picture. Attempts at reconciliation can be met with resistance, and even rejection.

But “chancing the arm” does, as I said, carry with it the hope of reconciliation. Even the promise, at times, as exhibited by the actions of Gerald FitzGerald in hacking a hole in the Cathedral door and extending his arm in friendship. And in the actions of the Butlers who were willing to reach out and grasp FitzGerald’s arm, not as an act of hostility, but as a sign of reconciliation.

Our Old Testament reading from Genesis, tells of the hope and promise of reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers. As you recall from the story, Joseph had been sold into slavery by his brothers years before. Joseph ended up in Egypt, and because of his ability to interpret dreams, provided a valuable service to Pharaoh, who rewarded Joseph with great wealth and power. In today’s passage, Joseph demonstrates his willingness to extend love and forgiveness to those who were his worst enemies, those who had betrayed him and sold him into slavery—his own brothers. He is able to move on and thereby begin the process of reconciliation with his brothers.

Joseph does not hold a grudge. As Lutheran pastor James Honig notes, “He forgives. He breaks with the oppression, fear, violence, and murder of the past. He breaks free of the chains of the past that very well could have determined the future. In his pronouncement of forgiveness, Joseph creates a new present and new future.” Honig goes on to state that “The new possibility, the new way of resurrection living, doesn’t care what Joseph’s brothers have done or about what baggage they might bring from the past. The new present and the new future care only about the gift of grace given by Joseph and by an indescribably loving God, who poured out that love on a cross and guaranteed it with an empty tomb.” (*Sundays and Seasons Preaching: Year C 2019, 2/24/19*).

This is a powerful interpretation of what Jesus is talking about in the Gospel reading. That holding on to grudges, refusing to forgive those who have wronged us, refusing to seek forgiveness from those we have wronged, is actually a holding on to the past. A past that is shrouded in darkness, that is filled with pain, hurt, and anger. A past that only colors and defines the present and the future. Forgiveness and reconciliation seek to step away from the bonds of such a past and to live in a new present and to move into a new future. A present and future that are not defined by the past, but rather defy the past. A present and future that transform the negativity of the past into something positive. As Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the Orthodox Jews in the United Kingdom so wisely notes, “When we forgive and are worthy of being forgiven, we are no longer prisoners of our past” (Jonathan Sacks, “The Day Forgiveness Was Born,” chabad.org).

I know what some of you are thinking. There may be—there are—some situations that make it virtually impossible to forgive someone who has hurt us. There is no denying that. There are some things that we just may not be able to bring ourselves to forgive. Hurts so deep and damaging. And even if we are able to begin to forgive those who have hurt us, sometime we just aren’t able to be reconciled with them. To be in relationship with them. And that’s okay. All Jesus asks is that we try to love, try to forgive. To not allow that hurt and pain to eat us up. To not allow that pain to define us. To not allow that pain and hurt to determine our present and our future. Instead, to focus on who we are in spite of the pain. Maybe even who we are because of the pain, if we have somehow been strengthened by what we once endured. To focus on the fact that even in the midst of the pain of the past, there is someone who carries us in the present and carries us forward into the future.

What we cannot bear ourselves, Christ bears for us. In our Epistle reading, Paul reminds the Corinthians—and us—that through his death and resurrection, Jesus seeks reconciliation with all humanity. Reconciliation for those ways we have defied God. Reconciliation for the pain we have caused God by our actions. Reconciliation for the pain others have caused us and God by their actions. In so doing, Jesus is not allowing our past to define who we are. He is giving us a clean break from a past defined by brokenness, sin, and death, because through his death and resurrection, brokenness, sin, and death no longer define us. Brokenness, sin, and death no longer determine our present or our future.

Mercy, compassion, love, and forgiveness are all hallmarks of the Christian life and our life together in Christian community. Jesus calls us to a way of life that extends beyond this world’s understanding and asks us to open our hearts, to open ourselves, to living in God’s love. In today’s Gospel, Jesus invites us to consider how we might realize his call to live out mercy, compassion, love, and forgiveness in ways that are authentic for our own lives. To live out mercy, compassion, love, and forgiveness in ways that bring healing to our own lives. In ways that continue to demonstrate God’s loving and merciful presence and work in the world. To seek a radically new way of being in relationship with one another. When we do this, we just might find that “chancing the arm,” while carrying some degree of risk, has the potential for bringing the peace that we need to be freed from the past, to live into a more positive present, and to move us on into a new and life-giving future.