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Genesis 45:3-11, 15

Luke 6:27-38

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GOLDEN?

It has been twelve and a half years since that dreadful day in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. By the name of the town, some of you already know the story I am thinking about. A man, whose young daughter had died, blamed God for it. His deep bitterness led him to murderous thoughts and then actions, as he entered an Amish school to kill others before he killed himself. I feel a need to say to the children who are present that since that attack, steps have been taken to help protect children at their schools.

Sister Joan Chittister wrote soon after the attack, “It was not the violence suffered by the Amish that stunned people - it was that the Amish community simply refused to hate what had hurt them.” An Amish grandfather, standing at the foot of one of the graves, said, ‘Do not think evil of this man.’ A delegation of Amish visited the family of the killer, and said to the deceased murderer’s family, ‘Do not leave. Stay in your home here.’” Sister Joan continued: “It was not the violence that shocked us. It was the forgiveness that followed it for which we were not prepared. It was the lack of recrimination, the dearth of vindictiveness, that left us amazed. Baffled. Confounded. . . It was the Christianity we all profess but which they practiced that left us stunned.”¹

I read an article that followed up on how the community was doing ten years after the tragedy that they called ‘the happening.’ The townspeople who had lost loved ones were not finished with the process of grieving or forgiving. One man recalled the shock of the day when he had to deal with the news that one of his daughters was dead and one was wounded. He chose to forgive. “But you see,” he said, “it’s a journey. I still made that immediate choice in principle. But it took me a few years until I could feel that I really meant it inside me, to forgive Charlie” (which was the name of the murderer). At the point when the father did find the compassion, he said, “I felt a great weight falling off me. I felt lighter.”²

Bitterness had been born when a father's young daughter died, and he blamed God. His bitterness and pain led to a murderous act. Corrosive bitterness could have multiplied as a result of the happening, but it did not because people of faith chose an alternative. I have to tell you, I have led a relatively unscathed life. I've not buried a spouse or a parent who was killed by a drunk driver. I've not been cheated out of a job. I've not been belittled for my race or sexual orientation. I've not been physically or sexually abused. But I have had members of the congregations I have served who have suffered in all of these ways, and I have deeply admired those who chose a route other than bitterness and violence to deal with their deep pain.

By God's grace, they came to understand the power of living by what has come to be called 'the golden rule,' doing to others as we would have them do to us. This saying did not originate with Jesus – it is found in a variety of ancient writings and many of the world's religions express it as a directive in some form. But we get a sense of what Jesus thinks about living in this way when he also talks about loving one's enemies. It seems Jesus thinks the golden rule should be followed even when someone is not treating us in the way we'd like to be treated.

What Jesus says about turning the other cheek and giving up your shirt along with your coat is also challenging. It's likely that Jesus is speaking here to those who were victims rather than victimizers, to those oppressed rather than to the oppressors. Jesus isn't calling victims to roll over and play dead. He is not telling victims to be quiet, to keep taking their abuse.

New Testament scholar Walter Wink has helped us see something far different here. He works primarily with Matthew's version of Jesus' lesson, but the same can be applied to Luke's version. He suggests Jesus is describing a form of non-violent resistance to oppression. In the culture of first-century Palestine, a person's left hand was used for what we might call bathroom functions, so you would not use that hand for much of anything, including striking someone with it. If you thought yourself superior to another person, you would strike them with the back of your right hand, never with the palm of your hand, for that would mean you'd see them as an equal. This is the idea Jesus is describing - if someone strikes you on the cheek, it will most likely be with the back of their hand. Jesus was talking with those oppressed by Roman soldiers who would not see people from that land as

equals. If you as the person who has been struck turn your face showing the other side, you force your oppressor to see you as an equal for even your oppressor won't use his left hand to backhand the other cheek. Some things simply weren't done. Jesus wants us to see an almost comical situation here. The oppressor's hand begins to swing but is caught in mid-air because he doesn't want to treat you as an equal by hitting you with open palm.

The same humorous resistance comes in giving up your shirt when your oppressor asks for your coat. This is not a situation where someone is donating a coat to the winter coat drive. Rather Jesus is talking about someone asking for your coat in repayment of a debt. You owe the other person something and since you have no land and very little money, the creditor asks for your very coat. Now there were very clear restrictions regarding the repayment of debts. You could not leave a debtor naked at sundown no matter what he or she owed. It was against every sense of decency and good order. So, Jesus sets up another strategy of resistance. If they ask for your coat, give them your shirt too. There you'll be standing half-naked; and they'll be forced to deal with this new reality you've set up. "No," they would say, "I don't want your shirt. Put it back on!" They might be so disarmed that they'll return your coat as well. ³

Jesus is not telling people to remain victims, but to find new ways of resisting evil. "Love your enemies," Jesus said, "do good to those who hate you." This is the ethic that moved Martin Luther King, Jr., to kneel down with many brothers and sisters before fire hoses and snarling police dogs. Many people thought he was crazy. "Only violence can fight violence," they told him. But the authorities and the oppressors didn't know what to do with this kind of resistance. They knew the power of violence; they knew the powerlessness of victims who knew what was supposed to be their place. But this was something they hadn't seen before: victims who refused to be victims, victims who refused to fight back with violence, victims who claimed their place and reshaped the battle completely because they loved their enemy enough to challenge their cruelty with creative kindness and bold peacefulness.

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." And don't be too impressed with yourself for being good to your friends. Anybody can do that, Jesus says. "If

you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.” Just when we have the Golden Rule memorized, Jesus reminds us that it’s far deeper than how we treat our friends. It’s far deeper than what we hope to receive. The real enemy is bitterness and violence, not the person who allows such things in his or her heart.

It’s one thing to talk about such things as ideas about how we might react. It’s another thing altogether when you are being unjustly executed in a painful way after your closest friends have run away. The various gospel accounts record seven different statements Jesus made from the cross. He did not say: “You’re going to burn in hell for this.” He did not curse. He did not say, “God,” literally, “damn you for this. You will get yours one day.” No, Luke tells us he lovingly said, “Father, forgive them.” May God’s grace shape our hearts to be as amazing, as baffling, as confounding, as golden as this.

¹ <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/where-i-stand/what-kind-people-are-these>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/02/amish-shooting-10-year-anniversary-pennsylvania-the-happening>

³ I rely on Barbara Lundblad’s account of Walter Wink’s ideas found here: http://day1.org/642-simple_yet_not_so_simple