

Epiphany 7, Year C – February 20, 2022 Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Luke 6:27-38
Epiphany, Winnipeg

Do you have enemies? Love them. Does someone hate you? Do good to them. Does someone curse you? Bless them. Does someone abuse you? Pray for them.

If they strike you on one cheek offer the other, if they steal your coat give them your shirt, if they take your stuff don't ask for it to be returned.

First, this: Jesus is not sitting in a room giving advice to a mom and two kids who just left a dangerous home, or telling the kid in school who got pushed around again to let someone get away with hurting them. He's not encouraging people who lose their land or their home just to accept it all and not seek some kind of justice.

And maybe this needs to be said too: If you've heard that a thousand times and it still sounds to you as though Jesus is saying that you should put up with abuse or theft, and if these words he speaks strike too close to home, and you want to argue with the preacher, please do. But be warned: sometimes preachers aren't so good with arguments, and sometimes we'll insist on the last word. If you've heard it a thousand times and it still doesn't sound right and you want to argue with Jesus, please do. If anyone can handle an argument, Jesus can. And if anyone can hold on to your hurt and let you speak, Jesus can. So go ahead. It's OK.

Or if these words strike close to home and they bring you some kind of stillness or promise, that's OK too.

So here's a story...a broken story about hurt and returning hurt, about stealing and giving and receiving and healing: It's the story of Joseph and his brothers.

Joseph was the second youngest among twelve brothers and a sister. He was the one who got special gifts from his dad; the one whose brothers always thought was their dad's favourite; one of those little ones who got all the love. You know how it is with the youngest ones.

When Joseph was about seventeen his older brothers were out working in the field one day and their dad Jacob said, "Hey Joseph, get off the couch and go join your brothers in the field." So Joseph went to join them, and when they saw him coming they thought maybe they should kill their spoilt little brother, throw him in a pit, and go home and tell dad that wild animals had done away with his favourite son. Cooler heads prevailed, so instead they threw him into the pit and sold him to slave traders, who in turn sold him as a slave far away in Egypt. *Then* they went and told their dad that a wild animal had taken his favourite son.

Can you imagine? Maybe you don't need to imagine because it's happened to you. Maybe you've known that kind of betrayal, and you've been sold out by a friend, or a relative, or someone you thought you could trust...and you know the hurt and the wonder... "How could they do this to me?" Or maybe you can only imagine....

The whole story of Joseph and his ancestors is full of stories like this one. A brother kills a brother, or the youngest child cheats the oldest child, or the daughters and mothers can turn family members against each other, or where the daughters and the mothers are there...just for the men and the boys to do with as they please. When Joseph is thrown into a pit and sold by his brothers, it's just one more broken story of the family. And Joseph carries that whole history with him, even the broken parts. It's just kind of in his bones, because these stories have a

way of sticking around in the lives of the people who live them...way back then...yesterday...and today.

Fast forward a few decades now, and things have gone well for Joseph in Egypt. In a surprise turn or two – too many details for now - Joseph has become sort of the right hand man to the king of Egypt. He's not a slave any more, he runs the country. One day a band of brothers shows up in Joseph's office, and they tell him that they come from a far away land, and that there is no food there, and they need to buy food from Egypt so that they and their families don't starve.

And Joseph recognizes them. They're his brothers who so many years ago threw him in a pit and sold him as a slave. So he does what anyone might do: he messes with them. For months and months. He doesn't tell them who he is, but he tells them that he thinks they're thieves and spies – terrorists crossing the border – and he throws them in prison for three days. He lets them out, but he keeps playing the game. He never lets on that he knows who they are. He sends them home to get another brother – it's a trip that takes months over deserts and mountains - while he keeps one brother back in Egypt. He frames them and makes it look like they've been stealing his money and his silver. He plants a little fear in them. Genesis 37-45 – have a look at it this afternoon.

Do you see what he's doing? He's toying with these ones who hurt him so badly. He makes them travel halfway across the known world and back, and he makes them do it again, and the games he plays and the ways he strikes back...it all breaks apart the whole broken story some more.

And at a few places along the way, Joseph sneaks away alone and weeps. Sadness? Joy? Anger over what they've done?

What do you do when someone who has tried to kill you and then sold you like a piece of livestock shows up on your doorstep years later?

All that comes to an end, though. Today Joseph finally gives up on the hurt for hurt and the revenge on his brothers. He finally tells them who he is, and they're terrified. What else do you do when you realize that you're talking to someone you sold down the road for a pocketful of cash?

But Joseph finally welcomes them. He weeps aloud now, right in the open, now he can't control his joy, and his grief, and maybe even his relief that now all these games are done and the hurting has ended and his old home has come back to him. And now his brothers make the long trip home and back again, but this time they bring back their dad and their partners and their kids and their grandkids. They're a whole caravan, and they cross the border because there's no wall there, there's just Joseph who welcomes them all and gives them a new home in this new rich place. And these people, all these people, are finally at home together, because love and mercy prevailed, and somebody finally said, "Enough. There's got to be another way. The hate and the fear will be over." And they are at home together – even in a strange place, they are at home together.

Fast forward a few thousand years or so after Joseph was sold as a slave, and after he made peace with his brothers...and maybe Jesus has learned from that story too; maybe heard it from his mom and dad, or from a teacher, or at the synagogue. So he throws an idea or two into the mix: Do you have enemies? Love them. Does someone hate you? Do good to them. Does someone curse you? Bless them. Does someone abuse you? Pray for them. Maybe Jesus is opening up a new

kind of world where we don't give someone violence in return for violence, or hate in response to hate; it's like he's saying that there's always another way, and throwing peace or kindness or love into the mix is simply what we're called to do. To be merciful, as our God is merciful. To be kind to the ungrateful and the wicked, just as God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Even when that means those people. Or even when it means us.

Maybe it's worth a try...because returning evil for evil or hate for hate hasn't really gotten us anywhere.

So Jesus offers something else: to love someone we thought was an enemy, or to pray for someone who has hurt us, or simply to pray for the ones you don't agree with, or for the ones who stand on the other side – you name the issue or the argument... To love, to pray, to show kindness, gives the one we pray for or who we at least try to love, a bit of space here...a bit of a home in our hearts.

That's the way that God – that Jesus - has chosen to be in the world: As one who loves those who would prefer to be enemies, and who prays for those who only want to hurt, who pours out kindness – measured out, pressed down, but overflowing, too much kindness to be contained! – into the laps and the lives of...all of us... It's how God – how Jesus - has chosen to be at home with us.
AMEN.