

### **The First Reading is from Genesis 45:2-11, 15:**

<sup>3</sup> Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. <sup>4</sup> Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. <sup>5</sup> And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. <sup>6</sup> For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. <sup>7</sup> God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. <sup>8</sup> So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. <sup>9</sup> Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. <sup>10</sup> You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. <sup>11</sup> I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' <sup>12</sup> And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. <sup>13</sup> You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." <sup>14</sup> Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. <sup>15</sup> And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

### **The Second Reading is from Luke 6:27-38:**

<sup>27</sup> "But I say to you that listen, '**Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.**' <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. <sup>31</sup> **Do to others as you would have them do to you.'**

<sup>32</sup> 'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup> If 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. <sup>35</sup> **But 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. <sup>36</sup> Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.'

<sup>37</sup> 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; <sup>38</sup> give, 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 Message is entitled, "*Radical Reciprocity.*"**

From the headlines this morning...Goodloe Sutton in 1998 was lauded for his truth in reporting and lauded as "one of Alabama's finest and most ethical journalists." Yet, this past February 14<sup>th</sup> he began an editorial in the Democrat-Reporter like this, "Time for the Ku Klux Klan to ride again." He went on to claim that Democrats, along with some Republicans, were planning to raise taxes in Alabama, so his editorial concluded, "Seems like the Klan would be welcome to raid the gated communities up there." He told the Montgomery Advisor, "If I could get the Klan

to go up there and clean out D.C., we'd all be better off," explaining, "we'll get hemp ropes out, loop them over a tall limb and hang them all."

Or from the most current issues of *American Rifleman* where an article is entitled in big bold type, "Target Practice," with the title placed over a photo of Nancy Pelosi and Gabby Gifford at a press conference calling for universal background checks. Did you know well over 90% of Americans support universal background checks, with 70 to 80% of NRA members supporting universal background checks. The article though isn't about universal background checks; it is legislation about firearm transfer bans.

Hateful inferences. Hateful speech. Hateful actions. Hate just seems to abound these days. I don't know about you, but I cry out to God pleading for God to reteach us civil discourse and how to love those with whom we disagree, hate or even consider our enemies.

Even so, our passage this morning from Luke's Sermon on the Plain is not one of my favorites, because it demands more of me than I am often willing to give. It very hard to love those who target us, demean us, hurt us, hate us or perpetrate violence against us. I think that is why it irritates me that Jesus says, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you?" For even sinners do these same things. What credit is it to you Cheryl, if human reciprocity is your standard? What credit is it to us if we just like those who like us? That is, doing others what they do to us!

Are you bothered by this passage? Human reciprocity means exchanging things with others for mutual benefit. Notice the word mutual in reciprocity's definition. Both parties' benefit. I love you, you love me. I do nice things for you, you do nice things for me. I lend to you; you return or repay to me.

Yet, Jesus says this is not enough, for even sinners do this. Just as I shared in the Wednesday devotional, even the father of the Soprano crime family loved his children. But, Jesus expects more of his disciples. Jesus expects his disciples to not only love those who love them, but to also love their enemies and to do good to those who hate them. There is no wiggle room in these instructions for them or for us; its expected says Jesus.

Mirosalv Volf writes in the preface of his book entitled, *Exclusion and Embrace*, "After I finished my lecture Professor Jurgen Moltmann stood up and asked one of his typical questions, both concrete and penetrating: 'But can you [Mirosalv] embrace a *cetnik*?' " Volf's class lecture had been based on this passage from Luke and he had just argued that we ought to embrace our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ. Yet, it took Volf a while to answer his professor, although he immediately knew what he wanted to say, "No, I cannot – but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to."

"I think I should be able to... what about you?" Of course, this is not an abstract question. This is a question, like it was for Volf, that is most likely personal for many, if not all of us. At some level we have all experienced offense, betrayal, deception, injustice, or violence. Words or actions may have cut deep into our psyches. Abuse or violence might have robbed us of our ability to trust the world around us. "What about you?" is not an abstract question.

So, I want to be clear that this passage does not condone harmful, abusive or violent behaviors. Jesus doesn't intend for any of us to be harmed. As Jill Duffield writes, "Let's be clear, Jesus never condones abuse. Jesus holds accountable those who persecute and injure others, and so should we. Jesus doesn't tell people to remain in dangerous, hurtful circumstances. [Even

so], Jesus insists that his followers – like Miroslav Volf, his disciples and each one of us – adhere to the standard of love. Although Volf's Croatian people were being brutalized by Serbian *četniks*, he realized that he would have to reconcile his own spiritual struggle with Jesus' words, as he held in tension the message of the cross and the reality of his world of violence. We, too have to have our own spiritual struggle with these words, just as Joseph did.

Joseph's brothers had enough of his wild dreams, so when their father sent Joseph to check on his sheep herding brothers, they conspired to kill him. Yet, Reuben talked a bit of sense into his brothers and Joseph was tossed into a pit, rather than killed. As the brothers ate a meal, they saw a cavern far off, so their plans changed again. Joseph was taken from the pit and sold to the Ishmaelite's. Fast forward a number of years to our part of the story today and we witness the transformation possible when love is extended even to enemies.

Joseph, a man of power in Egypt, had every right to be enraged with anger and desires for revenge when his brothers, that sold him off, came seeking assistance. Although, Joseph's story clearly models God's standard of love, we must remember that it didn't happen overnight. Joseph was tough on his brothers when they first arrived. He placed them in jail. He kept one brother, sending the rest to retrieve and bring back Benjamin. He desired to see his enemies squirm a bit you might say. He even accuses Benjamin, his beloved younger brother, of stealing his silver cup; a cup which Joseph's guard was instructed to place in Benjamin's bag. Duffield writes, "When rifts occur... getting to a place of mercy comes in stages, with fits and starts, and glimpses of grace mixed with extended stretches of threatening terrain." It took time for Joseph to mend the rift between him and his brothers. It took time for Joseph to relinquish love as a strategy of *quid pro quo*.

When Joseph finally revealed himself, his brothers were speechless and more than a little concerned. Especially when Joseph said to them, "Come a little closer." I imagine they were thinking that coming a little closer only hastened their demise, for Joseph would do to them what they had done to him. Human reciprocity would support that. Throw the brothers in a pit. Sell the brothers off as slaves. Make their life miserable, as they had done to Joseph.

Yet, Joseph had reconciled his struggle with God's command of radical reciprocity of love; loving for the sake of love itself – or better, for the sake of the beloved. Joseph said to his brothers, "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life." What was meant for harm, God used for good. Or as Thomas Keating wrote, "Show love tirelessly, no matter what happens. That's the meaning of turning the other cheek... If you overcome your enemies, you've failed. If you make your enemies your partners, God has succeeded." God succeeded in Joseph's story, for a family torn apart by jealousy and betrayal was knit back together again, because Joseph chose God's radical reciprocity over the world's by employing divine mercy for his brothers.

I don't know where there are rifts in relationships for you. All I know is that radical reciprocity is not dependent on the enemy's response. God's radical reciprocity is a choice, empowered by the Spirit at work within us.

It would be easy – even expected for Mary Johnson and Oshea Israel to be enemies. After all, Israel killed Mary's only son. Mary had held her anger and animosity for twelve long years in her heart. Yet, near the end of Israel's sentence, Mary wanted to know if Israel was in the same mindset she remembered him from court, for she had wanted to go over and hurt him.

Israel had been involved with gangs and drugs as a teenager and at a party one night he got into a fight with Mary's son and shot and killed him.

Yet, when Mary went to meet with Israel in prison, she didn't see a calloused 16-year-old teenager, she saw a 34-year-old man. She felt compelled to share with him about her son, about her hopes and dreams for him. And Mary's son became human to Israel. The same held true for Mary, because Israel became human to her. Mary was overcome by emotion as their meeting ended, so she instinctively got up and hugged her son's murderer. As they embraced each other, by God's grace, Mary experienced the transformative power of God's radical reciprocity. She knew her anger and animosity had melted away and that she had totally forgiven Israel. From that day forward, she began to treat Israel like a son.

Today, these two live right next door to each other in Minneapolis and Mary is quick to call Israel out when he doesn't look in on her. Her natural son is no longer with her and she wasn't able to see him graduate from college. But now Israel is going to college and she'll have the opportunity to see him graduate. She didn't see her son get married. But, she hopes one day, she'll experience that with Israel, too." Hearing her say these things, Israel says, gives him a reason to reach his goals. A deep, deep completely justifiable rift mended by love, an enemy not overcome, but made a partner.

Yet, what hope have we that such risky radical reciprocity will produce a worthwhile outcome? We don't. Bible commentator William Allen writes, "Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, in the fourth century reminded those struggling to love their enemies to read this text and see Jesus, who, though hated, cursed, abused, struck, and stripped, loved his enemies and opened a new possibility for them through mercy offered in spite of persecution. Ambrose could not read this text without remembering Jesus' prayer from the cross for his enemies' forgiveness," for radical reciprocity isn't dependent on the enemy. The offer of radical reciprocity doesn't bank on a return on our investment, that is why it is so radical, for radical means "going to the root or origin; or to what is fundamental." Love is our root, our origin. Love is fundamental to who we are in God. Love as Jesus says is our signature witness.

"How then shall we live? Less by the Golden Rule, '***Do to others as you would have them do to you,***' and more by Golden or Radical Love, '***But love... expecting nothing in return.***' [Jesus calls the disciples to] love beyond fairness, beyond exchange; love with the extravagance of grace and mercy, 'be merciful, just as God, is merciful.'"

Friends, we are born of love and made for love and loving others, especially our enemies will most likely never get any easier. Yet, remember the witness of Joseph. He doesn't condemn his brothers, but rather comforts his brothers. Jesus doesn't condemn, but rather prays for his persecutors. Although our lives are often full of struggles, slaps, demands and curses, couldn't they also be full of mercy, full of grace, full of the outpouring of love that doesn't expect anything in return.

Imagine how different Mary's life would have been, if she had not offered love to Israel expecting nothing in return. Two lives spiraling forever into bitterness, resentments and despair. Transformation is possible for us and for those we deem our enemies, if only we will embody the gratuitous love we have already received from God.

I don't know where there are rifts in relationships for you, but transformation is possible. Let's trust God to help us love, even our enemies, expecting nothing in return. Amen.