

How many of you think the golden rule—“**Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you**”—is a good idea? Show of hands. Good.

How many of you think “**Love your enemy**” is an equally good idea? Let’s don’t do a show of hands on that. We’re at church after all.

A better Question may be “How many of you are succeeding at this enemy-loving challenge?” No show of hands, please. It’s not really a show of hands kind of question. If we are honest, I suspect most of us would say that the hard truth is, it’s a lot easier to live by the Golden Rule than Jesus’ Enemy Love Rule.

There is a difference between these two ethical rules. If you obey the golden rule, you will probably come out ahead in life. If you obeyed the Enemy Love Rule, there is rarely any social reward attached to it. In fact, many people who tried to follow this love rule either lost everything or ended up dead.

Maybe the challenge is to act like you love your enemies even if you don’t really mean it. You know, act like a nice person even when it’s not what you really feel. Do it enough and it becomes a habit. And over the years your good habits become your virtues. People see you as the considerate person that, by habit rather than conviction, you have become.

Of course, even the golden rule can be a challenge: Like, *Should I give blood because one day I may need a transfusion? Should I give a kidney to someone in need. One day I may be in need of a person willing to give a kidney for me?* But being a good person is still considered a good thing as long as your not working on Wall Street or in Politics. If you were raised like me, it’s the social norm to live by even if you aren’t trying to live as a Christian. Even people with no faith are still taught to try and live by the golden rule. So what if Jesus is saying that *much more that the norm of social expectation is expected of the person who truly looks to God?*

To make his point, Luke tells us that Jesus adds some quick examples.

- “**If you love those who love you, why should you be commended? Even sinners love those who love them.**” *So, we’re called to love the less than lovable?*
- “**If you do good to those who do good to you, why should you be commended? Even sinners do that.**” *So, we’re called to do good to all, even those societies deem to be expendables?*
- “**If you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, why should you be commended? Even sinners lend to sinners expecting to be paid back in full.**” *So, we’re called to give with no expectation of return? Isn’t that the Golden Rule PLUS plan? The LOVE One Another even when its hard Golden Rule Plan.*

But if all that isn't enough, what identifies us as Christians, people who truly live by an ethic of love is this challenge to "love your enemy"? Oh my! What kind of transformation is needed to live like that?

That's where the other story we heard read today comes in. It's the Old Testament story about Joseph. The match-up between these two texts was made when the devised the lectionary readings for the church way back in the 1970s. Yeah, within most of our lifetimes. But I think it was a good choice. I mean, if anyone had earned that status of enemies, well I think it would have been Joseph's brothers, right? He had every reason to hate his brothers. But scripture says he ended up loving them. *How did that transformation happen?*

Put yourself in Joseph's story. You're a young Jewish boy of Bar Mitzvah age. Your dad dotes on you and, truth be told, you enjoy the advantages it brings your way. Accept a lot of those advantages come at the expense of your brothers—and you have a lot of brothers. This coat of many colors gift, well you're bragging about it was the straw that broke the camel's back—a hackneyed old saying. But one that gets it just right in this story. Because one camel came home that day without a rider. Your brothers had it with you. They conspire with one another and the next thing you know you've been thrown into a pit as they debated whether or not to just kill you and be done with it. But, instead, they decide to kill two birds with one stone and get something out of the deal. So they sell you off as a slave to traders in a passing caravan.

You'd wouldn't be happy. Maybe a little relieved to still be alive... But a life of slavery? No one is ever grateful to be sold into slavery. When they tied-up Joseph and put him in that caravan and sent him on his way, *well you can take it as gospel truth. From that moment forward hated his brothers.*

Now, you're a bright young guy. And scripture unfolds a plot that easily would be at whole season of episodes on *Netflix of Prime*. But eventually in Egypt your skills doesn't go unnoticed. Eventually, Egypt's Master of Slaves sees that special "Joseph's potential." You are set up running the papyrus scrolls and memos between the leaders of all of Pharaohs' various agricultural efforts. You learn a lot over those years from other people who had potential. You saw the big picture of the whole Egyptian grain storage business. You knew what they did well, and you knew what others with potential thought they could do better. But no one ever asked anyone to improve a system that seemed to work. There's a whole story, some of which is scandalous and some of which looks bleak—the real stuff of some good Netflix episodes. But eventually we get to the tale of how you ended up being the one to interpret Pharaoh's disturbing dreams. And after years of watching what the operation did vs. what the operation could do, You saw the answer. Harvest so much grain and store it up so that there would be grain for all when drought came. Make Pharaoh the man who conquers the world around him because he has the answer to their nightmare of famine. *YOUR PLAN was designed to make all the nations look to the Pharaoh as the one who deserved the honor of saving their lives.*

When Pharaoh appointed Joseph as his second in command, this former Jewish slave became a workaholic. He put the plan of creating a surplus supply of grain into action and was ready when the predicted drought came. And here's the thing. Beneath Joseph's driven do-good, persona, you gotta know that one very dark motive drove his plan forward. Pleasing Pharaoh and making him revered for his foresight in the known world was one

thing. *But knowing that his brothers would be among those who would end up coming hat in hand and asking to be saved. Well, that was the other thing.* The prospect of starvation would bring them. And Joseph dreamed of being seated before his brothers in official robes, enjoying a long, leisurely, lunch of revenge—a *dish always best served cold*. After feeding them a feast, he could send them all home empty-handed destined to die. *He would do to them as they had done to him.* Long before the A-Team actor, George Peppard who gave voice to his relish at getting the better of the enemy, said, “*I love it when a plan comes together!*” Well, Joseph spent his nights *waiting* for the day when his *plan came together*.

So what turned Joseph around?

All we know is that one day he looked around and saw who he had become. He saw how everyone else looked to him as the man behind the Pharaoh’s grand grain scheme that saved the world. He could even have said, “Success is the best revenge.” But he managed to admit to himself who he had truly become. To the world, he appeared to present a carefully curated *persona* of wisdom and statesmanship. But in truth, he was a man consumed by his desire for brother-hating revenge. And then.... something happened. He saw the end of that twisted desire. He saw that he was a man driven by hatred and it had become all-consuming in his life.

Then he remembered the face of his father Jacob—who loved him well if not necessarily wisely—but, loved him deeply. He remembered that strange story he had been told almost every day of his childhood—of the call of Abraham his great grand-father. A god unknown to Abraham’s family had promised that this patriarch and his progeny would *become a great nation* through which the world would be blessed. God promised Abraham

I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing.

**³ I will bless those who bless you,
those who curse you I will curse;
all the families of the earth
will be blessed because of you.**

Abraham had dedicated himself to a life-long journey of trusting the God who provided the promise that his life would be redeemed because of that trust in the generations to come after him. God promised that they would look back to him as the father of faith. Joseph looked back. And he realized that he was now living to achieve one and only one goal: *to bring that promise of that God to an end. To see the death and end of all his brothers and their families.* He had become a man twisted by hate.

When, Joseph finally confronted his brothers, he spoke as a transformed man. He now saw the world, his place in it, his brother’s place in it, and God’s hand in all that had happened in his life. He had encountered an incarnate reality that as the great grandson of Abraham, God had used him to begin to bring that blessing of Father Abraham to pass. All the nations were giving thanks to God because this child of Abraham’s seed had been the reason for their deliverance. All the families of the Mediterranean world had been blessed because Abraham’s great-grandson had provided for them.

When Joseph did the big reveal before his brothers, he uttered the truth behind why Jesus calls us to love our enemy. There is a transforming power in the depth of understanding God’s wisdom in our lives in Joseph’s words: **“You meant it for evil, but God**

meant it for good.” He was a transformed man—no longer driven by hate. He saw how God took the travail of his life and made of it the opportunity—if he would see it—to be the son of Abraham who let God redeem his life from hate to love.

God sent me before you to save lives....to make sure you'd survive and to rescue your lives in this amazing way.

The life of revenge, the life of “hate thy enemy” was gone because Joseph saw the hand of God where others saw the hand of their own evil actions.

“But God meant it for good.” Meaning what? What others think of you and what you think of others is not what gives meaning to your lives. Our meaning, is to be found in what God thinks of us, of our lives. Where do we look for the prospect of a common hope with which all of us who are kin bound together in the promise of what it means to be children of Abraham have been entrusted to carry forward into the future to all peoples and to generations yet unborn.

So, what is the message of this grand story for the children of Abraham today. How are we to respond to those who would turn our world upside down, deprive us of the live we had known and cherished with the threat of destroying our livelihoods and giving us over into slavery? Joseph’s providential wisdom and personal transformation provide godly “long view” counsel.

- *A transformed Joseph* trusted God’s guiding hand was on his life—the hand of grace toward for even his enemies.
- *A transformed Joseph* looked to hope in God to see the meaning of his life; not to a job, not to social standing or political fortunes of the day. *His hope was that God would use him to deliver others.*
- *A transformed Joseph* did not let hate of others corrupt his hope in God, fulfilling God’s claim on humanity through Jesus who calls us to be people *who love their neighbor whether friend or enemy, whether privileged or unprivileged, because that is our calling in love.*

More than just living by the golden rule, we are called to love even our enemy because living with seething resentment turns our gaze on the wounds of the world rather than the wounds of Christ, the wounds of transforming grace. We may wrestle with what forgiveness demands of us. What love demands of us? *But the love of God calls us to live as transformed people.* Surprisingly enough, Jesus calls us to “love our enemy.” **Take the risk.** It is a redemptive challenge to look past our world to see who God is... and who God calls us to be. To become people who live out God’s claim of love, acceptance, and forgiveness—even for our enemies. **Take. The. Risk.**

Amen?

Amen.

**With thanks to my friend John Angus Campbell who also let the one lection illustrate the other.