

Children of the Most High

Seventh Sunday of Epiphany

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O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing: Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you. Grant this for the sake of your only Son Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Genesis 45:3-11, 15 (NRSV)

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.⁴ 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."⁵ And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.⁶ 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.⁷ God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.'¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.'¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50 (NRSV)

But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?"³⁶ Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.³⁷ And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.³⁸ But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to

each kind of seed its own body. ⁴² So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵ Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶ But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. ⁴⁷ The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸ As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. ⁴⁹ Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven. ⁵⁰ What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Luke 6:27-38 (NRSV)

[Jesus said,] “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³² “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. ³⁷ “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ 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.”

One of the great Christian minds of the early 20th century was G.K.

Chesterton. He once wrote, “The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to

love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people.”¹ No doubt he had modern society in mind. That’s quite different than the context in which Jesus commands his followers—that’s us—to love our enemies. Jesus’ situation and that of the people who first heard him was as citizens of a nation under enemy occupation. Roman soldiers lived in a barracks in the Antonia Fortress on the northwestern corner of the Temple Mount. This made Roman soldiers not only enemies but neighbors. I guess Chesterton said more than the really knew!

In this morning’s gospel Jesus tells us we must “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” The enemies he’s talking about aren’t the Roman soldiers who are both neighbors and enemies. He shows us the enemies he’s talking about in this morning’s gospel in the last verse of last Sunday’s gospel, which comes just before the first verse of today’s. If you recall, he says, “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.” False prophets resist God by falsifying his word and persecuting Jesus’ followers. You may remember Jesus saying this, also from the Gospel of Luke: “From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be

¹ <https://www.chesterton.org/quotations/religion-and-faith/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20Bible%20tells%20us%20to,are%20generally%20the%20same%20people.%E2%80%9D>

divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” (Luke 12:52-53 NRSV) But this kind of opposition to God is nothing new. Jesus here quotes the NRSV) But prophet Micah (7:6) who wrote about 700 years before Jesus’ time.

It’s clear that throughout his ministry Jesus fully expected opposition. Remember the Jewish religious authorities Jesus frequently wrangled with. It was their opposition to the God they claimed to follow that drove them to manipulate Pilate into crucifying Jesus. He told his disciples, “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.” (John 15:18 NRSV)

Why do people oppose God so fiercely? We can get an idea from the story of Joseph and his brothers. In today’s reading we heard Joseph being reconciled to his brothers. Do you remember how they were estranged in the first place? Joseph was father Jacob’s favorite. His father gave him a special coat of many colors. His brothers were jealous. Even worse, he had dreams in which not only his brothers, but his father Jacob and his mother Rachel bowed down to him. Because of their jealousy, the brothers sold him into slavery and reported to their father that he had been killed by a wild animal. The story of Joseph goes from his beginnings in slavery to second in command to Pharaoh in Egypt.

Joseph's brothers hated him because they were jealous of him. We become jealous of someone when we resent them having something that we don't. Joseph had his father's special love and attention, which they didn't have. And his dreams threatened that he would take control of their lives, which they would no longer have. Jealousy is the source of all hatred and opposition to God. We're jealous of God's love for people we don't think deserve it. And we're jealous of the control God claims over our lives.

And lest we think it's just the bad guys in the Bible who are jealous of God, remember the final words of last Sunday's Old Testament lesson: "The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse-- who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9 NRSV)

The Bible says everybody's heart is devious. Our hearts work against us. They convince us that we're good people when we're really not. We're just like everybody else. We're jealous of God and his rightful control over our lives. Remember what the serpent told Adam and Eve in the garden? You remember the story: "The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'"" But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman

saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.” (Genesis 3:2-6 NRSV)

Adam and Eve wanted what God kept for himself, what they didn't have: the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The serpent tempted them by appealing to their jealousy and calling into question what God had said.

Let's transfer this dynamic to ourselves. Aren't we jealous of what God has? Knowledge of good and evil? Don't we want to decide right and wrong for ourselves? Let me give you an example. I was leading a Bible study in the Gospel of Matthew where we came across Jesus' command in chapter 18:15-16: "If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses." This is a principle that helps keep relationships healthy by good and direct communication. We're told to speak directly to someone who has offended us, rather than what is easier: speaking to someone else about it. But it's also Jesus' *command* to his disciples. But all the people in the Bible study adamantly agreed that they could never do that. I suppose it was just their genteel southern upbringing. But underneath, it shows that we jealously retain the right to decide what's right and wrong for ourselves.

And it shows that we jealously guard control over our lives, rather than taking the costly road of obedience to God.

In this morning's gospel Jesus tells us that loving our enemies will bring us great reward. He says, "Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." We are the ungrateful and the wicked. Romans 5:8-10 says, "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely, therefore, since we have now been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life."

Loving our enemies isn't easy. Chesterton was right: our neighbors and our enemies are often the same people. That's the point of the story of a 95-year-old couple sitting at the wedding reception for their great-granddaughter. One of the bridesmaids asked the great-grandmother, "Did you and great-grandfather ever think of divorce?" The great-grandmother paused for a moment and said, "Divorce? Never. Murder? Often."

The reality is that relationships in this life are sometimes very hard. Jesus' commands to love and care for our enemies make us feel inadequate and helpless. But be of good cheer! Jesus has fulfilled every one of them for us! He loved his

enemies by dying for them. He prayed for them, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34 KJV) Jesus was perfectly obedient to God’s commands because he is God. Listen to these words of Paul to Titus: “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” (Titus 3:4-7 NRSV) Because of his Father’s love for us, Jesus has transformed us from enemies to children of the most high by trusting in his giving his everything for us. Let us pray.