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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, February 20, 2022

7th Sunday after Epiphany /Year C

First Reading: Genesis 45:3-11, 15

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50

Gospel Reading: Luke 6:27-38

Sermon Title: “Radical Grace and Mercy”

Theme

Jesus continues to address a crowd of his disciples. He invites his followers to shower radical love, blessing, forgiveness, generosity, and trust even on enemies and outsiders. Living in harmony with God’s intent brings the reward of overflowing blessing.

Texts

Genesis 45:3-11, 15

³Joseph 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.

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

1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50

³⁵But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” ³⁶Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷And 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. ³⁸But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

⁴²So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. ⁴⁷The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸As 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. ⁴⁹Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

⁵⁰What 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

[Jesus said:] ²⁷“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bleed those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do 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. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If 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. ³⁵But 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. ³⁶Be 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; ³⁸give, 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.”

Sermon

I have decided that in today's sermon, I will give you the kernel of God's truth that I see running through the readings first, and then a couple of more times during the message. Are you ready? Here it comes: "In all circumstances, trust in the Lord always. For in doing so, there is the great reward." Pretty powerful stuff?!?

Take the First Reading for example. If you are familiar with the story of Joseph and the amazing technicolor dream coat, then you know that though he was his father's favorite, it cost him plenty. His brothers were jealous of him, so they plotted against him. They planned to kill him but then sold him into slavery at the last minute. As a slave, Joseph was falsely accused of a sexual misdeed and put in prison. In prison, he discovered he had been given the "gift" of interpreting dreams. Good and bad happened as a result of his learning to use that gift. The bad was that sometimes he became the bearer of bad news. The good was that he was able to foresee a terrible drought that might have wiped out a good portion of the known world's population including his own family. But fortunately for Joseph and the rest of the world, *in all circumstances, he trusted in the Lord, and in doing so, there was a great reward.*

If he was like the rest of us, during his trouble, he probably wondered what God's *good* intention was for himself. No one would ask for the trouble he got, but through it all, he always trusted in the Lord. And in doing so, there was a great reward. He became Pharaoh's most trusted advisor – the scripture called him the "father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt" (Gen. 45:8). And through all his troubles, it would be through this one man Joseph, the least of Jacob's children, that the promise that God made to Abraham would come true. *In all circumstances, trust in the Lord always. For in doing so, there is a great reward.*

In the second reading, Paul was trying to convince the Corinthians to remain faithful to God, revealed in Jesus Christ. For the Corinthians, it was much easier to go back to their pagan gods because, in Greek thinking, people's bodies were not resurrected after death. They saw the afterlife as something that happened only to the soul. According to Greek philosophers, the soul was the real person, imprisoned in a physical body, and at death, the soul was released. There was no immortality for the body, but the soul entered an eternal state.

Christianity, as Paul and the others taught, affirmed that the body and soul would be united after the resurrection. No matter what you think about that argument today, the church at Corinth was in the heart of Greek culture. Therefore many Christian believers had a difficult time believing in a bodily resurrection and so Paul wrote this section of his letter to reassure them of the Christian position. Can't you just hear Paul begging them saying, "*Trust in the Lord and I assure you, you will receive the great reward.*"

The Gospel Reading for today immediately follows the Beatitudes according to Luke that we had last week. Remember the blessings and woes? Well, this week Jesus continued with some very difficult proverbs. Now I have to say, proverbs are difficult to preach on because they are often unrelated, and that is the case in today's Gospel Reading.

^{27a}Love your enemies, That sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it? Don't we hate our enemies? Isn't the definition of enemies, those we hate? This just sounds contrary.

^{27b}do good to those who hate you, I don't know of anyone who "hates" me, though there are some who probably don't like me. I'm likely to simply avoid them.

^{28a}bless those who curse you, Not the first thing that comes to my mind.

^{28b}pray for those who abuse you. I don't consider myself abused by anyone either, but sometimes I pray for those I don't get along with, and for uncomfortable situations I find myself in.

^{29a}If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; This is problematic. I'm not a physically violent person by nature. I've never been in a fistfight, but I don't think I would let myself get pounded without defending myself.

^{29b}and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Wha, what? We're just supposed to stand there and let people steal our stuff, and then help them steal more? This is not justice! What about justice – we want our stuff back!

³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; Okay, I may have to answer for this one because I am not as generous as Jesus. We have some repeat beggars who refuse to help themselves and I feel like I am throwing money and resources away with them.

I have offered well-more than money, but they have refused. They just want money. I needed some direction in helping those who ask for assistance, so I wrote a Continuing Resolution that the Council and the Congregation approved, so now you are on the end of that rope with me!

^{30b}and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. There are some things I can be generous with, but don't mess with my tools. I know a lot of men who feel the same way.

³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you. Awe, the Golden Rule. My mother used to use this on me all the time and especially when my pesky little brother started something.

³²If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. Right Jesus! Duh, we love those who love us and vice versa!

³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. But that is what makes the world go round, am I right? Even sinners do the same!

³⁴If 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. I think this is pretty much how banking is done the world over, Jesus!

Quid pro quo - a favor or advantage granted or expected in return for something.

We have an expression in the western world, and it's "Quid pro quo." It means "a favor or advantage granted or expected in return for something." I think we could say that it's the American way or the universal way!.

But it's not Jesus' way. Jesus seems to be saying, do the good work first. The following is a list of the ways Jesus would have us function.

^{35a}But love your enemies, Jesus, we talked about this. They're enemies!

^{35b}do good, Fine, we'll do some good!

^{35c}and lend, expecting nothing in return. That's a nope from me!

But then Jesus did interrupt himself to say something I like:

^{35d}Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High;

But then he went off the rails again:

^{35e}for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. He was speaking of the Most High here, so we're off the hook.

³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

^{37a}"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; ^{37b}do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.

^{37c}Forgive, and you will be forgiven;

³⁸give, 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."

He went on like that for another eleven verses! And then, after all that, we don't hear anything about how Jesus' words were received. He just moved on to Capernaum. I suspect the majority of listeners thought they had already put up with enough at the hands of the Romans. They wanted a messiah who would kick some Roman butt not treat them with kindness.

I am sure there were many there that day that thought that all that stuff was just lofty proverbs and moralisms. Let's face it, anyone who lives up to all those ideals will only end up taken advantage of, abused, and a huge failure. And time would prove that to be correct in Jesus' case (*long pause*) if you failed to notice he was raised from the dead!

Jesus, being the controversial counter-cultural figure that he was, was telling his disciples that if they would just follow his example, and trust in the Lord always, they would receive the great reward. The same reward that he would receive – the bodily resurrection that Paul spoke of, life eternal with God that Jesus himself spoke of.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Well, what does this have to do with us? I'm so glad you asked. Christmas wasn't that long ago. We can still remember the lights and the carols. We sang, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." And then he came. But we don't like what he tells us to do. I admit it. I don't do some of these very instructions from my Lord Jesus, and that frightens me. Speaking for us all, we want to be his disciples, it's just discipleship in him we have trouble with. Am I right about that? Whenever discipleship comes down to "doing" we seem to come up short.

Thank God Joseph was willing to trust in the Lord. Thank God Paul was able to convince the Corinthians to trust in the Lord. And thank God that Jesus came and showed us how to serve God by serving others above ourselves – how to put the interests and well-being of others before our own, and for trusting the Lord that even in death there would be life eternal, the great reward.

Now let me be clear. That reward does *not* come with strings attached. Jesus never said that to receive the great reward we must do all these things. That would be contrary to the gospel. But what is consistent with scripture is that because we have received the great reward through our faith in Christ alone, we ought to be different because of it. If we are disciples of Jesus Christ, then we ought to be embracing the values that he was willing to die for and that includes doing those things that he held dear. Now I was pretty truthful in this sermon. I have a lot of work to do to be completely compliant with Jesus' proverbs. I commit to trying. Will you?

We can do it if we simply trust in the Lord in all things. And in doing so, the great reward will be ours.

Prayer

Most high God, what you ask of us today takes moment-by-moment vigilance because the human sinfulness we carry in our being is so very prevalent. But we know that you equip those you call, and so we count on your Holy Spirit to strengthen us to answer the call to live a life of radical grace and mercy. We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen