

I'm just telling you what Jesus said

The Rev Barbara Ballenger

On a Sunday morning more than 30 years ago, Jess and I were on our way into church. Standing near the entrance, a panhandler was asking for change, which wasn't too unusual at Corpus Christi where we attended, a church that I've preached about before. We rushed past the man without much thought – we were likely running late.

And when we got inside, the service was all about the generosity of God. Maybe the scriptures were the ones we had today, I can't really recall. But as Fr. Jim preached on all the ways that God pours out love and goodness upon creation, I was thinking about the beggar outside who we had brushed by. I don't think I was the only one either. After the service he was still there. Oh, what a relief, we thought, as we opened our wallets to this man. He probably made \$300 that day.

After the service we went to breakfast at the restaurant that the church ran to train people who were leaving prison. Fr. Jim was there drinking a cup of coffee. "Oh Fr Jim" I said. "Your sermon was so moving. There was a man who was panhandling outside, and your sermon reminded us to be generous and to give to those who ask."

Fr Jim looked right at us. "Oh no, he said. "That was probably Cleveland. You didn't give any money to him, did you? We have connected him with resources, we have been working with him, and we have told him not to panhandle in front of the church. Don't give anything to Cleveland."

"But Fr. Jim," I said, "you just preached a whole sermon on the generosity of God."

To which Jim said "I was just telling you what Jesus said, I didn't tell you what I would do."

I love that story, because it taught me just how Fr Jim and his community lived out their devotion to the love of God – with love and care certainly, and also with resource and firmness and with boundaries. To listen to what Jesus says, is one thing, to figure out how exactly to put it into practice is another.

This is what today's passage from the Gospel of Luke is all about – loving the way that God loves. A few paragraphs earlier, Jesus had just called his 12 apostles to follow him, and he took them and a group of his followers up the side of a mountain, and he told them what it took to really follow him.

Before Jesus gives them this teaching on love, he told them how much God loves them. We call that part of the story the Beatitudes. Jesus knew that many of the people who were drawn to him were poor and hungry. Some of them had lost loved ones and were in mourning. He knew that some felt meek and powerless, and that many had been bullied, and insulted and mistreated and attacked. He wanted his followers to know that he saw them, and God saw them, and they were blessed right in the middle of all their suffering because God loved them right there and was the means by which their suffering would one day end.

Then in the next breath, Jesus told his followers how to love like God. And that meant loving the people who made them poor and left them hungry, the ones who caused their mourning, who mistreated and attacked them.

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 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. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

This is what it means to be like God and love like God who loved them. Jesus was describing God's love as something that blesses, heals, and provides for even the people who don't deserve it – especially the people who don't deserve it – in fact who of us, if you think about it, truly deserve it? Not only that, God loves even the people who consider themselves God's enemies.,

Why? Because such a love changes things, it transforms things – its intent is to heal the breach, to reverse the damage, to restore people to what God intended. Where is such love most needed? It belongs in the relationships that are marred by conflict, friction, disagreement, disdain. It belongs in the broken places, because if you don't address the broken places, they just become more and more broken, and the world becomes a place of more and more enemies. Have you ever been in a relationship like that – the wounded party or the wounder, a participant in the friction or the one trying to keep from getting hurt? Don't raise your hand. But I can tell you that I have too.

I need to stop here and invoke the wisdom of Jim Callan. The love of God that Jesus was talking about does not bless abuse, or asks for another smack, or look the other way when harm occurs to you or others. It is not peace at any price. It is not forgiveness that does not name the wound and call people to responsibility. But it is love that makes a choice to bring healing rather than harm to the conflicts that we inevitably find ourselves in.

“The kingdom that Jesus preached and lived was all about a glorious, uproarious, absurd, generosity.” Those are the words of NT Wright, who is one of my favorite writers. Now that's very different from the way some people describe God – as a mean, judgmental, angry, violent deity who set up standards that no one can meet, and who punishes every mistake. Now that kind of God is pretty handy for people who want an excuse to be mean, angry and violent and set standards that only a few can meet.

But that's not Jesus' Abba, and it's not the God of Israel. Consider the story of Joseph that we had today. You can find the whole saga in the book of Genesis, or in the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolored Dreamcoat* or in the movie *Joseph Prince of Egypt*. It's an old story that came before the story of Moses and the flight from Egypt and the 10 Commandments. It's a story about how Israel ended up in Egypt in the first place. And it's a love story.

But it doesn't start out as a love story – quite the opposite. Joseph was a weird kid growing up. He infuriated his brothers with his dreams, especially the ones where they would all end up bowing to him. They were jealous of the fancy coat his father gave him. It was obvious he was the favorite. Joseph didn't really know when to quit. He probably didn't deserve to be thrown into a cistern by his brothers

and then sold to a wandering group of merchants who made him a slave in Egypt. But that's what happened. It was something his brothers couldn't undo. They had to live with that – and the pain it caused their father Jacob for the rest of their lives.

So Joseph grew up in Egypt, and the gifts that God gave him to both dream powerful dreams, and interpret the dreams of the others, ultimately won him favor with the Pharaoh, and he became the Pharaoh's right hand man.

During a time of famine, when there was no food in the land, the Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of distributing food that Egypt had saved up, based on Joseph's advice. And when we come to today's story, Joseph has realized that his own brothers are among the refugees who have come to Egypt begging for food.

The whole story boils down to a choice that Joseph has to make - a choice between life and death for the family that had hurt them. Because he had the power to turn them away and let them starve. He also had the power to feed them and never tell them who he was, let the break remain complete. But he did neither of these things.

"I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt," he tells his amazed and worried brothers.

And with those words they had to face what they had done to him all those years ago. And by naming their wrong, and what it had done to him, he claimed the choice to forgive, and the power to bring not only food but healing to his broken family.

"God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God."

Joseph realized that to offer mercy and forgiveness to his brothers at this moment, was to choose life. To love as God loves. And to serve and obey that God.

It is not unlike the forgiveness that Jesus extended to those who put him on the cross. It is not unlike the choice God made to redeem us all.

That my friends is powerful love. It's the very soul of the Gospel, and the very heart of God's saving work among us. And it is not beyond our ability. But it is hard, and we don't always do this kind of love that well.

But we can practice it in earnest, with intention. I believe there are many opportunities around us. Who here goes to school and spends time on a playground? Recess I daresay provides many opportunities to love your enemies. To not participate in the cruelty that kids learn there. To walk away from a fight, rather than join it. To accept people rather than reject them. To befriend rather than taunt.

Who here lives in a neighborhood? Plenty of opportunity there to practice loving those who aggravate you. You know they are. For me it's the woman who scolded me for 10 minutes when I let my dog poop

in someone's yard, even though I picked it up and bagged it, and admitted that she was right, and I would do that next time, but she kept on at it until I vowed never to make eye contact with her again.... That kind of neighbor. Every time I see her I have a choice to make about love. I'm still working on that one.

As Fr. Jim pointed out, what Jesus says and what I would do aren't always the same. But what Jesus was saying, was that when we are in conflict with people and we still show them kindness, compassion, patience, and I would add honesty and healthy boundaries, we may be changing the world for the better a little bit, allowing us and them to be more like our best selves and less like their worst selves.

Another one of my heroes is Dorothy Day, who gave up all her possessions to live with poor people and to work for peace and justice. She used to say she was called to make it easier for people to be good.

That's what God's love does for humanity, for us. It makes it easier for people to be good.

Consider the times that you have been forgiven, or shown mercy, were fed, or comforted or provided with something you needed. How did that make you feel? Were you different as a result?

This kind of love is delivered by human hands. But its source is God. That's the power of the love of God set loose in the world through people. It changes us. It changes others.

This kind of love is needed now more than ever. Our next opportunity to love in this way, is surely just around the corner.

Amen.