

EPIPHANY: IN FAITH WE PROCLAIM GOD'S LOVE FOR ALL PEOPLE

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

February 18, 2007

Proper 2

Genesis 45:3-11, 15

Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40

1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50

Luke 6:27-38

Love Your Enemies

The Gospel passage from Luke begins with Jesus' well-known words, "Love your enemies, and be good to everyone who hates you. Ask God to bless anyone who curses you, and pray for everyone who is cruel to you" (*CEV*).

We read this passage when we in America are gripped by fear of our enemies. Our enemies attacked the World Trade Center and Pentagon, killing thousands. We have attacked and killed enemies threatening our nation: al-Qaida operatives, Taliban forces, those still loyal to the policies of Saddam Hussein. We continue to hunt for Osama bin Laden. President Bush's administration has created a new super-agency, the Department of Homeland Security, to protect us from outside enemies.

Our fear of enemies extends to those within our borders whom we label as enemies of society, for example, the criminals we put in prison and sometimes execute. The extent of this fear may be measured in the statistics given by The Sentencing Project (www.sentencingproject.org). The United States of America is now the nation with the largest percentage of its population in prison – 2.1 million, a 500% increase over the last thirty years.

Among Bible translators there is a strategy called domesticating a text, making it sound familiar, comfortable, easy-to-understand. We domesticate Jesus when we take hard sayings such as "Love your enemies" and turn them into comfortable, easy-to-understand guideposts for life. We domesticate Jesus by treating such a hard saying as a metaphor, a figure of speech, not to be taken literally; or, by giving it an elitist twist, turning it into a behavior for saints and heroes of the faith, but surely not for ordinary folks, or even for our political and social leaders.

The opposite strategy is called foreignizing a Bible text, leaving it unfamiliar, hard to understand, challenging, and tied to its ancient culture. When we foreignize Jesus we accept that his words are designed to push us out of our comfort zones, to make us uneasy about some of our personal and national choices, for example, killing our enemies.

Foreignizing Jesus does not let us easily dissolve his words into metaphor and elitist behavior. The challenge and impact of his words will not go away; they confront us with insight and wisdom and reality in the same way that Good Friday and Easter Sunday confront us with Jesus' claims on our hearts and lives, nation and society. We can get a sense of this impact by looking at the literary and historical context of Jesus' command to love our enemies.

The literary context of Luke 6:27-38 lies in Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, which shares common features with Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, for example, the Beatitudes, and the instruction to refrain from judging others. Bible experts trace the common teaching in Matthew's and Luke's version of this sermon back to a kind of anthology of Jesus' sayings, a sort of transcript of what Jesus taught. Both Matthew and Luke concur that Jesus directed all his followers—not just some of them—to love their enemies. Luke takes this instruction one step further, as our passage indicates: "The way you treat others is the way you will be treated" (Luke 6:38, *CEV*).

The social world of Jesus (and Luke) placed him in direct and daily contact with political and social enemies. Recall that a Roman army occupied "Palestine" (the Roman designation for what Jews called Judea, Samaria, and Galilee). Cruel Roman administrators and battle-hardened troops put a face to this enemy. Socially, Jesus and his followers faced people whom society treated as enemies: tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, debtors, criminals. The Gospels make it clear that Jesus did not advocate killing his enemies, but chose to love them instead.

Why does killing our enemies commend itself to us as a national and social policy rather than loving them? Maybe it has to do with finding what you look for. Once I was playing basketball in front of my friend Mike Mathis's house, when suddenly he lost a contact lens on the driveway. We looked and looked on the driveway but could not find it. Finally we went into the house, found his dad and I said, "Mr. Mathis, Mike lost his contact lens and we can't find it." Mr. Mathis got up from his easy chair, went outside and came back about 90 seconds later. He was holding a contact lens. "How did you do that?" we both asked in amazement. Mr. Mathis replied, "You two were looking for a piece of plastic. I was looking for \$150."

What if we intentionally looked for ways to love our enemies? What if we found in Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection a way to say "Enemies, no more"?

This week's Reflection was prepared by Robert Hodgson, Ph.D., who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Dean of the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: West Bank and Gaza Strip – With thanks to God for God's constant protection, and with prayers for the Palestinian people who find themselves on the verge of civil war, and with prayers for the safety of Bible Society staff and that relief programs would continue unhindered;
Jordan – With thanks to God for God's protection during two years of change, and with

prayers for the new Bible Society General Secretary and for new opportunities to distribute the Bible and that God will encourage young people to read the Bible; **Israel** – With thanks to God for protecting the staff and their families and for providing funds for the ability to continue operating in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Galilee, and with thanks to God for the distribution of a youth edition of John’s Gospel and for the printing of the Hebrew Gospels with the Psalms, and with prayers for the Hebrew New Testaments that are supplied to the New Tribes Mission in Bolivia, and for the opening of a Christian training center in Nazareth.

Activity Corner: Prayer Cards

Supplies needed: Bible; 3” x 5” index cards or pieces of paper; pens or pencils.

Read Luke 6:27-38 and discuss Jesus’ instructions to love and pray for one’s enemies. How does one act on these words? Distribute index cards or pieces of paper to members of your household and invite everyone to write down “enemies” for whom they will pray. Encourage everyone to keep their cards as a reminder to pray for those they have named. Conclude by reading together Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40.