

Influence and Forgiveness

(adapted from: You want me to do what? Feb 2022)

Today we are very much aware of Independence Day. I want to start by speaking of another country's Independence. Mahatma Gandhi was the father of India's independence movement. His non-violent activism inspired many people around the world. Once when asked about the topic of forgiveness, he said, "***The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.***" Many believe he was interpreting Jesus' teachings.

Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 45:3-11, 15:

³ 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.

New Testament Lesson Luke 6:27-38:

²⁷ "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, 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

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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.”

“**Do to others as you would have them do to you,**” is said by John Calvin to be the summary of the laws of fairness and impartiality. It helps us see beyond ourselves and into the life of others. It makes us imagine walking in their shoes and seeing if we would like to be treated like they have been treated.

Our entire Civil Rights movement in this country is based on a call for the majority to see the hardships of the minority. MLK said that Gandhi inspired him in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. But the influence was not one way. Gandhi was more than an activist; he had studied western traditions, including the Bible (especially the teachings of Jesus). He studied the war for independence in America, and the subsequent political actions during the early period of our country.

In his studies of America During the mid-1800s, He learned that women here in America began to work together to advance their voice in government by seeking voting rights. What was happening here in America (the idea of Freedom and participation in government) was catching on internationally.

The women’s suffrage movement won a victory in the US in 1920 by helping pass the 19th amendment to the constitution. The Golden Rule gives those who experience privilege, knowingly or not, a chance to begin that change, be it the ability to go to a decent school or the right to vote. Fairness is mainly provided by those in control and received by those not in control. How should those who have been on the receiving end of unfairness handle themselves according to Jesus’ teachings?

I am not a betting man, but I would stake my Netflix password that everyone here this morning has experienced unfairness, helplessness, or hurt in general. In our OT lesson, we see the ultimate outcome of the Joseph narrative in Genesis, and although there is a “happy ending”, the story leading up to it is filled with betrayal and intrigue.

Jesus would have known this story and may have been interpreting it when he said love your enemy (even if they are your brothers and sold you into slavery) or maybe he was interpreting Proverbs 25:21 when it says “If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink (Pr. 25:21). Joseph does this, and Jesus teaches this. One

Influence and Forgiveness

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cannot love if one cannot forgive. And I believe that is **Step One** of Jesus' teachings in our scripture today.

How do we forgive? Gandhi said that forgiveness is the attribute of the strong. So, I guess the question should be, how do we find the strength to forgive? The prophet Isaiah says, "God gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless (Is 40:29)" and God tells Isaiah, "do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am the Lord your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand (Is 41:10)."

Later, Luke will record Jesus himself seeking strength from God in prayer just before he was arrested. Luke writes it as, "' father if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done,' Then (Luke records what follows) an angel from heaven appeared to him (Jesus) and gave him strength (Lk 22:42-43)."

Our strength comes from God alone. On our own, we can accomplish very little that matters. How often do you seek God's strength each day? How important is it for you to do so? How difficult is it to admit that our personal strength is insufficient? Because I am here to testify that I can't do it alone. And if you have 30 minutes, I will be happy to give you that testimony. But I digress.

Step one of Jesus' teachings is to forgive. If I were here to hand you dime-store theology you will hear on TV, I would make that point and we would go home. But there is step two. **Step Two** is implied by the way Jesus teaches; we must forget.

We cannot love an enemy that reminds us of a transgression. We must wipe away the memory to truly forgive and love our enemy. How to we do that?

We must be merciful as our father in heaven is merciful. I believe Jesus interprets Isaiah (Is. 43:25) and Jeremiah (31:34) when he tells us to act like God because both prophets tell us that God not only forgives us our sins but also forgets them. As a result, God's love endures all the heartache we have caused. I believe Jesus calls for his followers to do the same.

In today's passage, Jesus says, "Be merciful, just as your father is merciful (v.36)." Matthew records the same teaching, "Be perfect, therefore, just as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:48)."

The Greek word translated as "merciful" (oiktirmos) is something one achieves when one becomes mature in the biblical Greek understanding. One cannot be merciful until one becomes an adult. The idea is that a child cannot be merciful because a child has no power and

Influence and Forgiveness

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is always at the mercy of someone else. Like Joseph was to his older brothers. But when they came looking for food, he held the power and chose to forgive.

The Greek word translated as “perfect” (*Teleios*) in Matthew does not have the same connotation as our understanding of perfect either. Today perfection is an unattainable goal we only strive to achieve. The Greek meaning of *Teleios* is understood as “to grow up” or “become complete.” So, the teaching in both Mathew and Luke could be translated as “Be an adult, like your father in heaven is an adult.”

That point took some late-night translating, and divine discernment.

Jesus also spoke wisdom phrases that have a deeper meaning when you think about them from the advantage of knowing the Joseph story.

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

These statements are in a future passive voice. These are wisdom sayings that on the surface tell us that we will get back what we put in. again on the surface, dime-store theology. BUT. The Future Passive Voice of these wisdom sayings indicates that this predicate action is fueled by something other than the one to whom Jesus is speaking. That is a fancy way of saying the action, the verb in these sentences, the motion is fueled not by us but by the strength of God.

I am asking a lot of you today, but once again think back to the Joseph story. I won’t go into specifics, but Joseph is the youngest brother at the time, he is at the mercy of his older brothers and is sold.

Once he makes his way into Potiphar’s house we are told over and over that God was with him. We he is thrown into prison because of Potiphar's wife we are told that God is with him, when he interprets Pharoah’s dreams and eventually becomes second in command of Egypt, God is with him. His strength came from God, and when he forgives his brothers he does so because God is with him, giving him the strength to rise above the pain, hurt, and betrayal.

This brings me to my final point,

Let me preface this by saying, I do not expect anyone here to agree with me. I do hope that in the spirit of these teachings you will at least listen.

Today in church, and tomorrow in the world we celebrate America. This wonderful experiment in a democracy sometimes gets ugly. Case in point, just turn on any cable news outlet, read a

Influence and Forgiveness

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national newspaper, or look at social media of any kind, and you will hear opinions of why our country is not perfect. I hear Christians say that America was built on Christian values. I learned in Seminary that the American form of government was heavily modeled after Presbyterian Polity. And it has been summarized by modern theologians that the decline of our American culture is the result of the decline of American churches. Do with this information what you will but I would like to make this point. As Christians in American churches in the greatest country in the world. A country that allows us to worship freely and pray as we see fit. Fellowship with one another in public without fear of black SUVs pulling up and whisking us off to undisclosed locations like would happen in so many other countries in this world...

The answer to our problems is not pointing fingers or ignoring the problems we face and hoping they will go away. The answer to the problems reported in every news outlet or discussed at the water coolers everywhere we go is this... no matter what your politics, no matter how patriotic you are, or are not. We must be Christians before anything else. To God be the glory, great things he hath done.

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 ... the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

Or to say even more plainly, *do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*

If we acted like that, truly acted like that. Every church in every town in America would be standing room only.

All Christian theologians agree that Christians are set apart in this world. Not for the betterment of ourselves, but because God wishes us to be a part of a divine solution. We cannot achieve the perfect society by our personal values or biases. To be part of that solution is to be the blessing we are called to be. To forgive our enemies, pray for them, and dare I say it, LOVE THEM.

Today and tomorrow as we celebrate Independence Day. We should thank God for the good in our past, but also lament the things that have gone wrong, and Pray for God to forgive us all for those things. We should each stay passionate about our convictions, but at the same time not point fingers in judgment at the opposition. Pray for victims of violence, injustice, and intolerance. Pray for those who disagree with you and pray that they also pray for you.

Let us pray,

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Merciful God, thank you for the insights we find in scripture. Thank you for the teachings of Jesus and the strength you send each day as we struggle with judgment in our hearts. You know the hurt that has scarred each soul in this place today. You know how hard it is for us to forgive. Yet somehow, you forgive us, even while on the cross. You not only forgive, but you forget as well. Thank you for the continued blessings we receive every day through your Spirit. We ask that you help us forget the hurt, help us forget it all, just as you do with our sin. Teach us to forgive and forget, teach us how to grow up. All this and more, we pray in the name of Christ Jesus, and all of God's people said, Amen.