

Epiphany 7 Year C: 23 /24 February 2019
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY 13323
The Reverend Gary Cyr

“God’s grace invites us to sow seeds of kindness when faced with hatred, to bless one another when confronted with provocation and violence, to love unreservedly those who would deny our existence. When we treat others as we want to be treated, we are drawn towards our better selves and embody Jesus’ teaching through God’s grace. ”

Genesis 45: 3-11, 15
Psalm 37: 1-12, 41-42
1 Corinthians 15: 35-38, 42-50
Luke 6: 27-38

One of my more recent guilty pleasures is a Netflix docu-series hosted by Morgan Freeman entitled “The Story of God”, which is not to be confused with Karen Armstrong’s book *The History of God*. These are two different approaches on a similar topic. Each of the episodes in the docu-series focuses on a particular topic associated with the concept of God. In one of these, the topic was “Who is God,” saw Freeman set about talking to various religious leaders in a variety of faith traditions asking them who they thought / felt God was. The one’s who stood out for me were the pastors of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas; the pastors being Joel and Victoria Osteen.

In his conversation with Freeman as he sought to articulate what he and his wife do at any given service, is “leave them [the worshipers] something they can use [after the service] . . . I don’t go a lot of doctrine. I go practical.” I get what he is saying. However, I am troubled by it as well. Especially in light of today’s gospel reading, which suggests there is no easy route to discipleship.

Unlike the Osteen’s, I, and other mainline churches, adhere to a lectionary. Doing so means I cannot pick at random lessons that fit my own agenda of particular religious views. Following a lectionary means I must face the difficult passages and seek out the good news they

impart. If leaving with practical advice is what one seeks, then don't look at today's gospel. What Jesus iterates isn't good advice for a practical individual. It may be sound spiritual teaching, but not good advice.

Love my enemies? Seriously? In all honesty, can I dare to say that to people who have faced or experienced genocide? Pray for those who abuse you? Try saying that to someone who has experienced emotional, verbal, or physical assaults from a loved one or someone they trust. Should I let people steal from me and not hold them accountable? Should I just give them more? Reading this passage without context is dangerous. Doing so condones rather than condemns behavior that harms others. Yet the principle Jesus is speaking of remains sound. Not necessarily practical, but sound.

This is about Christian formation. This is not about a self-help ideology or consumerism – seeking something to make us feel better. The Christian praxis Jesus speaks of does not center on intellectualism – on the gathering of knowledge we have about Jesus or our interpretation of said knowledge. This praxis is the embodiment of Jesus' teaching that challenges our perceived conventions. To love another in spite of their attitude towards me, their behavior towards me is difficult. I am being asked to forgive them, not excuse their behavior. I am being asked to love others, and love often entails holding one another accountable. That too is part of a Christian praxis.

We don't have to look too far to see this principle put into practice. In the Joseph narrative found in the Book of Genesis – from which we hear today a portion of the final chapters – we observe a young man's journey from aggrandized naiveté – of a youth enamored with his privileged status as his father's favored child to a man responsible for his own behavior towards those who subjected him to years of misfortune and despair.

Joseph was rejected by his brothers, sold into slavery, subjected to mistreatment, accused of acts against his master's wife, imprisoned and given charge over others like himself, and finally, rising to a position of power that saves a nation and his own family. He has every right to be angry and to seek revenge against those who did him wrong. What he offers is forgiveness instead of retribution. But not until he has first tested his brother's resolve. Joseph is by no means perfect, but he does seek accountability. Rather than react toward his brothers

disfavorably, he gives them the opportunity to repent. Joseph provides them with an opportunity to demonstrate their resolve for one another, their care for one another, something that was denied him in his youth. And they will rise to the occasion.

The transformation we hear in the Joseph narrative is one that occurs over time. Something all transformations require. It isn't instantaneous, for if it was it would be fleeting and momentary. It wouldn't last. Real spiritual transformation takes time and perseverance; it takes trials and errors along the way. Jesus knows this. He knows that what he is saying to his followers is a tough pill to swallow. It goes against the grain of what many of us are taught, and it takes time and openness to understanding one another's situation in life, whatever that may be. Jesus is simply saying not to judge, nor condemn – that whatever measure you use towards your brother, sister, neighbor is the measure that will be used on you yourself.

There is wisdom in Jesus' words. It is wisdom that is sage advice rather than practical knowledge. This advice encompasses that no one need remain in an abusive relationship where emotional or physical harm is imparted. No one is asked to endure the systematic destruction of their life through war and conflict; through the abuse of power that seeks to eradicate one's perceived enemy. Life is sacred and we must honor that. However, as disciples of Christ, we are also asked to seek to understand the pain and fear that motivate those who inflict harm on others. That is the hard work of being a Christian. One that takes time and effort well beyond the knowledge imparted in self-help literature or feel-good worship services. Jesus is asking us not to do what we want to do, but what we need to do in order to foster a life of loving service.

Morgan Freeman asks in the docu-series, "Who is God"? In the end, the answer, found in many traditions throughout the world, is God is that which draws us toward our better selves. God's grace invites us to sow seeds of kindness when faced with hatred, to bless one another when confronted with provocation and violence, to love unreservedly those who would deny our existence. When we treat others as we want to be treated, we are drawn towards our better selves and embody Jesus' teaching through God's grace. Can there be any more practical advice than this? Love yourself. Love your neighbor. By all this, you will love God!