

24<sup>th</sup> February 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

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Hymns:     87     Praise to the living God!  
              539    On this Baptism day, God we thank you  
              520    Give to me, Lord, a thankful heart  
              350    I cannot tell

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Readings:  Genesis 45:3-11, 15  
              Luke 6:27-36

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### **“Loving our enemies”**

#### **Prayer**

‘But I say to you that listen: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.’

Let us pray - Holy God, break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the word of my lips, and the mediation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. AMEN

Jesus began this set of very hard teachings, ‘I say to you that listen.’ Friends, there is still time to block your ears – Jesus said, I say to you that listen. We do not have to listen.

It is going to get harder still. Bless those who curse you - If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other one.

And alongside this teaching, we have its demonstration, as we drop into the story of Joseph and his many coloured coat in Genesis – and see him not only forgiving the brothers who sold him, but entirely blessing them. Lest we think this loving of enemies is just a New Testament thing.

Friends, I think we are brave enough to keep our ears open today. Because there is nothing more relevant in our world, nothing more difficult than the question of what to do about enemies.

Yesterday one of our Methodist mission partners, Mary Corput, put her polling card in her hand and voted in the Nigerian election. This week our public conversation has been considering the status of a 19-year-old woman, Shamima Begum, who went to be with IS in Syria.

Yesterday, Venezuela has shut its border to aid – and all the rest.

I think we should hear Jesus out, if for no other reason than hating our enemies - or even trying to protect against them - has not been working out so well for a little while now – Albert Einstein is quoted as saying the definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over again, but to expect different results. Hating our enemies, protecting against them has not been working out so well - I think we should hear Jesus out.

And although enemy is a strong word, I want us also to consider that at some point in each of our lives we are likely to be on the wrong end of it. Despite all best intention, there may well come a time when I am stood among the brothers of Joseph we heard about in Genesis, and have nothing to say as I realise the harm I have done. When I realise I have become the agent of harm in someone else's life.

So Christians over time have wrestled with the teaching – and made different responses: how are we going to love our enemies.

Some have said, 'try harder.' Love more – be more humble, work on ourselves more – and dig deeper. Because God loved and loves each of us this way. With utter self-abandonment. And they are right.

SO that's a first answer, 'try harder.' And goodness knows, we can – we should try harder – to find it in ourselves to have patience in small things, to love where we are cursed, to refuse to become like those who have hurt us.

And we should challenge ourselves to love more, and better, and to break down the parts of ourselves that just want to love the easy folk and the folk we agree with, we should challenge the parts of ourselves that nurse a grievance, or worse, appropriate someone else's grievance and use outrage about it to make ourselves feel good or look good without having to do anything about it – I think they call this 'virtue signaling' - or get all defensive if challenged at all.

And there are even some advantages, to the try harder approach – we know the only real antidote to anger, the kind that simmers and poisons and makes bitter – is compassion. An anger unhealed or unaddressed in the end, hurts the one who is angry more than the one who did the harm.

Ideally we address the cause of the anger – but some injuries cannot be undone. In that situation, which is the one Joseph was in with his brothers - then to feel compassion for one who has hurt us, this releases us. Empowers us. It takes power away from the one who hurt me, and puts it back with God. It says to the one who hurt us, 'No more airtime in my spirit for you.'

We should try harder to love our enemies, of course.

But there are some problems too with the 'try harder' approach to how to love an enemy.

Because this teaching has been used to keep people in their place – over centuries – you are going to get a reward in heaven, so somehow it's ok to be abused right now? And not all of

us can go around a bad situation, or avoid it. Are we saying to the person who is being beaten, day by day, love your abuser?

I think not. This would be not only unnatural but unscriptural – Psalm 27 is pretty clear – We believe we will see the goodness of God in the land of the living.

And Isaiah is pretty clear: what do I want with your piety, your sacrifices, if you are going to oppress your workers?

And Jesus was always clear, new life and healing begins NOW – the kingdom of God is come close today.

I am happy to be told, ‘try harder,’ and I’m there with that, but we need more.

There is more. Other Christian commentators work to expand the definition of ‘love’, redefining what it means so that to LOVE my enemy so it protects me from too much harm to me as I do it. We can love an enemy without liking them. Without having to give them power to define us, or accepting their violence as legitimate?

And sometimes to love means to challenge – love is not passive, but refuses to collude with harmful action. Loving action can be tough loving action. It can set boundaries for a loved one, or challenge an employer, or a political system. Love in relation to those who steal means stopping them from stealing.

Sometimes loving someone means leaving them where a relationship has become abusive or violent. Or neglectful. Surely loving someone who wants to do real harm to our society means voting them out of office.

So we can love our enemies, but expand and nuance the definition of love to as to protect ourselves from the worst harm they might do.

But there are problems with this too. John Wesley encouraged us in a plain reading of scripture – and Jesus was specific in the way he illustrated his point. Have you been hit, turn your cheek to be hit again. Has someone stolen from you? Give more. Give to all who ask.

So as with the ‘try harder’ approach, I am helped in how to love my enemies by more meaty definitions of what it is to love. But we still need more.

I want to turn to this part of the long story of Joseph and his brothers – the demonstration of his loving his enemies just at the moment when in power, he could punish them. There is a delicious narrative tension as we wait for the reveal – it comes in the first verse today – I am Joseph - when will they realise – and what will he do? He who was beaten for dead, robbed and sold by his own brothers?

Jesus calls people to relate to one another. And to go on relating to one another. My observation is that the way of the world especially now is that in conflict, especially hot conflict – there is a cycle of bitter breaking of relationship.

What we know of Jesus, is that over and over again, he calls us to be neighbours, and he makes us kin with one another. But he also tells the truth about the harm that has been done one to another, and to heal it.

My observation is that Joseph can love his enemies a little more easily from the governor's throne than he might have from the ditch. He might have loved them, and blessed them from the ditch – our God is a graceful God - but a plain reading of scripture tells me it was easier for him to love his enemies from the Governor's bench.

So it strikes me, a first way we can be more likely to love our enemies is to build one another up. To support one another in the cost of that love.

So what will make us more likely to be able to follow Jesus' teaching? Companions to bind up our wounds when we get hurt. Truth telling, that the cost of enemy love is not equally distributed - certain groups of us have arbitrary privileges – not unlike Joseph's new found power - like credit cards and passports, like skin colour, class, or gender - that protect us from the worst of this harm and make it much easier to take the risk of loving an enemy. If we are going to be more likely to love our enemies, to break the cycle – a little more sharing of the cost might help.

I find myself agreeing with the editor of the evening standard, and many commentators in and out of churches - when he wrote on Friday against the decision to strip Shamima Begum of UK citizenship – you may not agree – conscientious people can disagree on what to do, because it is not simple.

But we read in the Evening Standard, 'I understand the anger of those who say she should not be allowed to return to the UK. After all, she supported a terrorist cult that Killed Britons, and in her interviews at least, she showed little remorse.' He went on – 'But Ms. Begum is our homegrown problem. She was groomed by extremists when she was 15 in our country. If she has committed crimes, imprison her, if that's what a court decides.'

His point, is that it was on our watch, she was radicalized.

What is my part, my responsibility in the situation that allowed her to get the deluded, criminal, perverted place where she thought ISIS was a better life option than London? It's not an easy question, it's not one I have an easy or simplistic answer to. This is about me, about us, about our society – not about one young woman – if Jesus called us to be related to one another as the first thing in his teaching.

There are harder questions – it may be her passport that creates a legal obligation on the part of the United Kingdom, but it is not her passport that creates God's love for her, or interest in her redemption? Does our God care less for babies not born to British parents?

It seems to me Jesus is not telling us to love our enemies or to do any of those other things he mentioned as individual to individual transactions, but as part of being in relationship with one another and staying in relationship with one another to our cost. No easy answers

– this is not about following a set of rules which will keep us safe, but about risking relationships that will make someone else safe.

No easy answers – there were not in Jesus’ day and there are not in ours. Perhaps in that situation of relationship, we are less likely to have enemies, and less likely to become enemies. And more likely to share the cost of peace making. This is called the kingdom of God.

He said to those who listen, ‘Love your enemies.’ Do good for those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.’

And in answer to the question how, we have said ‘Try hard,’ by all means – dig deep. And we have said ‘Have an understanding of love that challenges injustice, that stands up against systems and people that abuse, that frees and empowers.’ Yes. But above all, keep listening – to one another, to Jesus, to the witness and wisdom God has put in your own heart. God is not done with our world yet.