

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
February 24, 2019
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God's Reconciled Kingdom

Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, Amen.

Imagine this scene if you will. You are on a city bus, its hot, you're tired and you've had a tough day. A young man across the aisle is slumped in his seat, not paying attention to his two young children arguing loudly and running up and down the aisles. What is your first reaction? Perhaps you are thinking, "Really? Can't you control your children?" or maybe you just angrily change seats.

So let's add a little information. The man and his children boarded the bus a few stops before at the local hospital, where he just lost his wife to cancer and is returning home for the first time without her. Now that you know a little more of his story, how might your response be different? In this hurried world, rarely do we take the time to hear the story, to consider a larger perspective before we rush to judgment. Yet we all share a story of brokenness. If anger is our first response, how do our hearts ever move to compassion?

This morning's lesson from Genesis tells the story of Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers. Just to catch you up, Joseph was the firstborn son to Rachel and Jacob. His half-brothers resented Joseph's favored status, and his penchant for dreaming, while they worked the land. They plotted against him and sold him into slavery in Egypt. Unjustly imprisoned, Joseph's prophetic dreams brought him to Pharaoh. He eventually became second in command. Our story begins as Joseph's brothers travel to Egypt during a famine. They don't know that they have come to their brother for help. When Joseph recognizes them, he does not retaliate, but provides for them. What inspires his compassion? Having known suffering, Joseph has been transformed by it. He sees the larger perspective, recalls their common story and trusts God's love to empower him. He says, "Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life." This moment of reconciliation was God's plan for humanity.

In the Gospel today, Jesus teaches his disciples to keep this larger perspective, even when they face persecution. To be a Christ follower they must trust God's love to empower them to forgive those who have hurt them, to do good to those who hate, and to pray for those who have abused them. Now we might dismiss these demands as impractical in the real world. Our sense of fairness wants the evildoer to receive his just deserts. But Jesus offers us a different view, that we are children of an abundant God, who inspires a heart of generosity, so that love will have the last word. Jesus challenges us to face adversity with faith that God's love is transformative. This is a higher call, to live contrary to our human nature and to our culture's norms. When we pray for our enemies, we push through our limits and see others through Christ's eyes.

Theologian Frederick Beuchner writes about the enemy, "*we think of ourselves as more civilized nowadays but maybe it's only because we're less honest. We tend to avoid fiery outbursts, we smolder instead. If people hurt us or cheat us or stand for things we abominate, we're less apt to bear arms against them than bear grudges. When we declare war, it is mostly submarine warfare, and since our attacks are beneath the surface, it may be years before we know fully the damage we have either given or sustained. But when you see who your enemies are, you see the lines in their faces and the way they walk when they're tired. You see when they're scared. You see how they are human even as you are human, and that is at least a step in the right direction.*" In this sometimes cruel culture it is risky to open our hearts to let God's mercy flow through us.

On Dec. 20, 1943, a young American named Charles Brown was on his first World War II mission. Flying in the German skies, Brown's B-17 bomber was badly damaged. The four-engine plane was limping along on only one engine, with guns that no longer fired. As Brown and his crew of 9 men tried desperately to escape enemy territory, a German fighter plane pulled up to their tail.

Franz Stigler, a 29-year-old German flying ace in his Messerschmitt fighter, already had scored 22 "victories," the destruction of enemy planes. Stigler was one kill away from being awarded the Knight's Cross, one of the German Air Force's highest honors. But the horrors he had seen earlier in the war led to a change of heart that day. When Stigler flew close to Brown's plane, he saw in the eyes of the wounded bomber crew, young men no different than the ones who served beside him. Franz knew the Knight's Cross stood for bravery, yet it was success at humanity's expense.

Across the frozen skies Franz gave a friendly nod and escorted the Americans to safety. What happened between them, the American Air Force would later classify as "top secret," and an act that Franz could never mention or else face a firing squad. Forty years later the two men reunited in a bond of friendship. Their story is recounted in a book entitled, *A Higher Call*.

We have been given a vision of our higher call, to love without limits, to persevere with heart even when it seems impossible or impractical. As we enter this Lenten season, a time of reflection and renewal, I invite you to wonder: Am I skimming the surface of my faith? Is there a larger perspective that can change my reality? Do I really see the eyes of another and understand our common story? Will I let God's love flow through me to live with a compassionate heart?

God's abundant love empowers us to push on despite our defeats, and to develop a heart willing to risk generosity of spirit. In loving beyond our imagination, we become a part of the greater perspective, God's reconciled kingdom on earth. May God bless us with tenacious hearts as we seek the ordinary and extraordinary ways to live a higher call. Amen.