



## **A Mouth-Dropping Experience Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Luke 6:27-38 Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (February 20, 2022)**

Back in December, the New York Times ran an essay with a funny title: “Rudeness Is on the Rise. You Got a Problem With That?” In it, Jennifer Finney Boylan laments the rising tide of rage and meanness in our Covid-weary culture. “How,” she asks, “do we respond to a world under stress, a culture in which the guardrails of so-called civility are gone? The evidence of that stress is everywhere. In airports, and then in the skies, you can find airline passengers angry about wearing masks, angry about inspection of firearms in their carry-ons, seemingly angry about, well, everything. Close to home, things aren’t much better, and it comes from both sides of our ideologically divided society.”<sup>1</sup>

If last week gospel on blessings and woes was hard to take in, today’s passage is even harder. Jesus continues his message on the Beatitudes to the listening crowd and gives them (and us) a series of commands that can really make our skin crawl.

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

How can one really “love, do good, bless, and pray” for one’s enemies? This requires self-control, openness, patience, and understanding beyond human abilities.

One perhaps may be able to go beyond conflicts of opinions and find a will to dialogue and work together. We haven’t seen much of that in the political arena as well as in social interactions lately, but past experience tells us that it is doable. People have demonstrated the ability to treat one another with a certain level of respect, dignity, restraint, and civility.

But can one really go against one’s own interests?

Can one love and do good to the rapist, the murderer, the abuser, the human trafficker, the liar, the cheater, and the hater? Can one master any desire to bless and pray for dictators and terrorists, for the torturer and the sadist, for those who are indifferent and cruel towards the plight of the vulnerable, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised? Where can one find love for those who put other people’s life in danger? Is one supposed to find love for the antagonist and the gossiper? And what to say of those who abuse their power, those who promote and defend unjust systems, and those who try their best to limit or even silence the voice of the disadvantaged?

Can love be offered and can a prayer be lifted without a simple acknowledgment of the evil done or still occurring, without the telling of the truth?

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<sup>1</sup> [Opinion | Stress Is Crushing Us, and It's Making Us Rude - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/14/opinion/stress-is-crushing-us-and-its-making-us-rude.html)

In today's passage from the book of Genesis, Joseph was able to forgive his disloyal and nearly murderous brothers. We can take in the enormous impact of this act of grace only if we remember that this is the apex of a family's drama spread out over decades and involving parental favoritism, sibling rivalry, arrogance, jealousy, slavery, sexual intrigue, mistaken identity, vengeance, family reconciliation and personal redemption.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph forgives his older brothers for sending him into a lifetime of hardship. He helps them to see how God: "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."

In today's gospel, Jesus instructs the listeners to "Love your enemies."

Surely, Jesus' listeners had their enemies. They had a whole Empire with its army as their enemies. The Palestinians found their land occupied and their economy controlled by a foreign power. They couldn't work without heavy taxation, and they had no legal recourse. The laws generated by the Roman Senate were meant to benefit the Roman citizens at home and abroad, and they could care less if the local people, whom they controlled by force and by law, were stripped of their possessions and their voice.

The legal system was not created to be equally protective of all people. It wasn't a democracy. In a democracy, all voices count, and all people have equal standing before the law. If there is any injustice, if there is any foul play, the people would rebel and make their voices heard. Their street protest, their legal system, and their legitimate vote would expose and rebuke the abuse.

But it isn't so in an Empire. If you are the citizen of an occupied country, you are a non-person, you don't count as a human being, and can be easily abused and your protest squashed. Your resistance is easily viewed as terrorism. The dictatorial nature of the imperial system was structurally designed to take anything in its path to grow the power and wealth of Rome. If you were a citizen of the Empire, Rome was the best place to be; you could even go for free gladiator shows at the Coliseum if the rich sponsored the games in a show of wealth and power.

Obviously, if you were not a part of the Roman elite, you didn't have so much power and that much wealth. Still, the average Roman would not see how privileged he or she was for simply being a citizen of the Empire. Romans would, maybe, realize how the law was on their side and benefited them only if they were out of the country and as a soldier or merchant or officer of Rome would have the power to lord it over the local guy. Oppression was legitimized and ethically acceptable.

That's the way it is in the world: if you have someone above you that orders you around, you find someone under you to release your frustrations on and to take advantage of. If you are on the top, would you put yourself in the shoes of the one who is oppressed? In a true democracy every life counts equally, every voice is included, every vote is protected.

So, the people listening to Jesus knew their enemies; they knew powerlessness and abuse; they knew the sinful nature of structural injustice. How could they love their Roman enemy and the local system that played in the hands of Rome for the purpose of keeping their hands in the pot?

The Romans were suffocating life out of their bodies and were submitting Palestinians to the lie of their privilege which humiliated them as non-people and non-humans. How could they accept

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 37-50

or negotiate with Roman supremacy? Rebels tried to raise their voices, but the Empire's strength and military capability were unmatched. Many died on the cross.

And here Jesus comes with his revolutionary proposal: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who abuse you.

I wonder how many eyebrows were raised and how many people discounted his words as nonsense and left him. Why didn't he call them to arms? Why didn't he acknowledge their plight?

But he has acknowledged the plight of those who suffer by the hands of the more powerful. His teaching and his healing have always placed him on the side of the suffering masses.

He is not expecting that change of heart from the general public. He is talking to his disciples, those he calls to be part of the new community. Jesus is not talking about interpersonal conflicts among equals here. He is clearly acknowledging a differential of power and is making a very hard request of those who find themselves in a lower and more vulnerable position in society. It is a counter-instinctive response that Jesus is commanding. This is how those who want to have a part in the Kingdom of God behave.

By loving, blessing, and praying for one's enemies one is challenged to move beyond hatred and revenge to a better form of establishing accountability. Jesus is not asking people to forgive and forget. Forgiveness isn't pretending that an offense hasn't happened, or doesn't matter, or that a wound doesn't hurt. Forgiveness isn't acting as if things don't have to change, or assuming that God has no interest in justice.

Jesus isn't suggesting that we allow ourselves to be abused and mistreated. By offering the other cheek or giving more to the abuser, Jesus is not encouraging masochism.

On the contrary, he is giving clear examples of how one can assume a fuller form of self-love and power. Jesus seems to say, "Shock and confuse your enemies; that's how you love them. Don't back down. Don't withdraw. But most of all, stand your ground non-violently without hatred."

This passage must have been on Rev. Dr. Martin Luther Kings, Jr.'s mind when in 1963, he was imprisoned in the Birmingham, Alabama, city jail on charges associated with "parading, demonstrating, boycotting, trespassing, and picketing." During the eight days he spent behind bars, Dr. King wrote the famous "Letter From the Birmingham Jail."<sup>3</sup> In it, he elaborated on the six principles of non-violence:

1. Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people;
2. Nonviolence seeks to win friendships and understanding;
3. Nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice or evil, not people;
4. Nonviolence holds that unearned, voluntary suffering for a just cause can educate and transform people and societies;
5. Nonviolence chooses love instead of hate; and
6. Nonviolence believes that the universe is on the side of justice.<sup>4</sup>

By using Jesus' suggestion of shocking and confusing the enemy, one's human dignity is affirmed. What was a dehumanizing action by the abuser gets turned into a humanity affirming

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<sup>3</sup> [Letter from a Birmingham Jail \[King, Jr.\] \(upenn.edu\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [The King Philosophy - Nonviolence365@ - The King Center](#)

tool. Turning the other cheek and giving up even the tunic are actions that in an honor society are meant to shame the abuser and elevate the humanity of the abused. With the use of self-transcending actions, the abused looks in the eyes of the abuser and affirms his or her humanity.<sup>5</sup> No words needed, no retaliation called for, no return of violence.

Jesus is saying that there is no mileage in payback, sustained hostility, harboring a grudge or carrying on a feud. Hostility does as much damage to the aggrieved as to the offender. Someone said “Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.”<sup>6</sup>

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

Why should we follow this advice? Because God has put this in motion: God is compassionate to the ungrateful and the wicked as well as to the good guys. Have you ever experienced God that way? Has God ever brought you up out of the abyss of hatred and death, ungratefulness and selfishness, and restored you to life? Have you ever been shown compassion and forgiveness that you did not deserve? Haven't you ever been surprised by grace? Haven't you not ever been humbled by God's mercy? Then go and do the same.<sup>7</sup> Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> [What Is Nonviolent Direct Action? Here Are MLK's 6 Principles \(msn.com\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*

<sup>7</sup> Luke 6:36 but also Luke 10:37.