

Date Preached	20-Feb-2022	Date Initiated	08-Feb-2022
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Epi 7, Yr C

" Jesus says, 'Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.' "



During our vacation last month, I read an engrossing book by a professor of history at Calvin College, out in Grand Rapids, Michigan.¹ The threads of the book are many and intertwining, but one recurring theme was the twentieth-century Evangelical movement's overthrow of the Victorian-era Church's docile, passive Jesus² in favor of a muscular, hyper-masculine Savior.³

Now, most Evangelical churches do not follow a lectionary, so I don't know how often they read and preach the Gospel lesson we just heard. But I have to imagine when they do, it sets a lot of teeth on edge: a Jesus Who isn't just passive—Who doesn't fight back—but Who even encourages us to do good for those who hate us! "Be merciful," He tells us, "just as your Father [in Heaven] is merciful." We prayed in today's collect that Jesus' greatest gift to us is love. But the form of love He teaches His disciples today is *too much*, isn't it? Too weak; too indulgent: too 'doormat.' It seems like a recipe for allowing bullies and brutes to take over the world.

But in an interesting juxtaposition, today's readings pair Jesus' sermon about love with the *denouement* of the story of Joseph—yes, he of "Technicolor Dreamcoat" fame—and his brothers. The full story sprawls across the fourteen final chapters of Genesis, so I'll give the briefest of summaries: Joseph is Jacob's favorite son by his favorite wife. Joseph isn't shy about lording his superiority over his brothers, who grow sick and tired of him and rashly sell him into slavery. After being transported to Egypt, Joseph, amazingly, rises to become the pharaoh's chief-of-staff and savvily steers the Nile nation through a disastrous famine. The same famine plagues Jacob's family back in Palestine, and, twice, Jacob sends his remaining sons⁴ to Egypt to purchase grain. They encounter Joseph, who recognizes them although they fail to recognize him. Joseph toys with them: provides them the grain they seek, but quizzes and makes demands of them, without ever revealing his identity.

At last, as we hear today, on his brothers' *third* trip to Egypt, Joseph reveals who he is, and his brothers feel doomed: Surely, Joseph will now avenge their hatred of him and the pure evil they did to him. But Joseph turns the other cheek; he doesn't judge or condemn them, but *forgives* them. He gives his father Jacob and his eleven brothers ... who, with Joseph, comprise the original *twelve* of the Twelve Tribes of Israel⁵ ... everything they will need to live in Egypt and thrive during the

¹ *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, by Kristin Kobes Du Mez (2019).

² *I.e.*, conception or interpretation or image of Jesus. As God, Jesus is, of course, all things ... and also beyond complete human understanding.

³ Indeed, in Kobes Du Mez's telling, this divine hyper-masculinity then 'trickles down,' if you will, to the Church: "Dominant masculinity" becomes a fundamental principle of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Evangelical ethos.

⁴ Except Benjamin, Joseph's only other full brother. (Jacob has sons (and also one daughter, Dinah) from four different women, only two of whom he is married to.)

⁵ In truth, the various Old Testament accounts of the tribes of Israel are not altogether consistent. Both the number of tribes and their originators vary, depending on which list you're consulting.

great famine. Kisses and tear ensue, and all the brothers, reunited at last, launch into a convivial discussion of everything that's happened over the many years since Joseph departed.⁶

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Now, as a lesson in Judeo-Christian morality, the Joseph story is tidy and complete: Joseph never ceases loving his brothers, despite their bitter jealousy and unspeakable cruelty. He 'repays' their hatred by giving them everything they ask for ... saves the lives of those who, at one point, had actually plotted to kill him.⁷ He almost *embodies* or *typifies*⁸ the very love lesson we hear from Jesus today.

But there's more to Joseph's kindness and generosity than sound ethics or 'taking the high road.' Listen again to the reason Joseph doesn't hate or scorn his brothers: "It was *God* Who sent me to [slavery in] Egypt—not you," he tells them. "God had Pharaoh put me—a lowly foreigner—in charge of all the food in this land so that I could ensure the survival of the nation of Israel."⁹ The mighty Israel that God had covenanted to make of Abraham and his offspring was in danger of extinction, by famine, a mere two generations later. Joseph's forgiveness of and reconciliation with his brothers—a reconciliation marked by wildly extravagant generosity—are the pathway through which God keeps God's covenant and ensure God's will. Said another way, Joseph's selfless 'do unto others' *human* love of his wretched brothers ... is the vehicle for God's *divine* love taking root and flourishing in this world.

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"Be merciful, just as your Father [in heaven] is merciful," Jesus says. God's will is always love. It is a love that does not keep score ... does not adhere to our human sense of 'fairness' ... does not reward the just and punish the jerks. God loves *all* God's creatures simply for *being* God's creatures. *None* is unworthy of God's love, because God creates *all*. *None* is irredeemable, because Jesus redeems *all*. God's love never stints or withdraws or hesitates ... because the *ultimate* end of Creation is a world that is totally in love: with God and with one another.¹⁰

Now, to those who prefer some toxic-male, swaggering Savior, I'd offer this: The Jesus we hear in today's Gospel lacks neither muscle nor might. He doesn't battle or retaliate against those who attack or scorn or betray Him because, as God's Son, He literally embodies the will of God, which is love; in Him, God's will always prevails.

⁶ Technically, what we hear today is not the conclusion of the Joseph story. After Jacob dies (in Egypt), Joseph's brothers again grow wary of his true intentions toward them. They concoct a story about Jacob's dying wishes and leverage it to implore Joseph to pardon them, again (Gen 50).

⁷ Gen 39:20.

⁸ A tip of the hat here to the *typological* school of biblical interpretation, which sees and hears in many of the events that take place before Jesus' Nativity and after His Ascension as 'types' (anticipations and recapitulations, if you will) of the essential truth of Jesus' words and deeds. In this case, Joseph's generous forgiveness of his brothers is a 'type' whose ultimate truth lies in Jesus' Self-sacrificial forgiveness of all our sins.

⁹ Joseph's actual words are so that he could "preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors" (Gen 45:7). In Joseph's telling, he is essentially the keeper of God's covenant with Jacob (via Abraham and Isaac, his grandfather and father, respectively) to make the people of Israel as numerous as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the seashore. Without Joseph's intervention, the Genesis story implies, Jacob's family would have died of starvation in Palestine.

¹⁰ There *are* limits to the love Jesus seeks us to show others. Wanton violence and systematic abuse, be they physical, mental or emotional, are contrary to God's law and God's will. Jesus does not ask us to turn the other cheek to someone who has already struck it repeatedly or to give our last shirt someone who's torn up all our others.

What's more, Jesus tells us today: *We*, as His followers, *also* embody the will of God; we, *too*, are sent out into the world to love all God's creatures, come what may, come what might. And, like Jesus, we need not battle or retaliate or judge or condemn, because, in the Jesus Who is *in us*, God's will prevail, if we love. When we love, as Jesus teaches, by taking pity; or showing mercy; or blessing those who curse us, we, like Joseph, embody God's will for this world. When we love, as Jesus calls us, by withholding judgment; or offering forgiveness; or praying for those who've wronged us, we, like Him, bring to life, in the arid desert of this world, the flower of God's peace and the tree of God's righteousness. Because Christ loves us without fail and without measure, He **both** enables and calls us to do likewise.

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I suspect there may be more than a few of you who, right about now, are thinking, "This all *sounds* very good, but it's not possible ... it's not achievable." And, in a way, you're right: Without Jesus, it *isn't* possible. We can *do* Jesus' love only when we are *in love with* Him.

And so, I offer this invitation: Next month, a group of us will embark on a nine-week journey on *The Way of Love*: an interactive, practical, experiential approach for 'trying on' various ways we can ... within the rhythm of our ordinary, daily routines—no heroic sacrifices; no heavy reading ... both feel *and* do Jesus' love. Each week, we'll come together for some table fellowship, some prayer, some sharing and some reflecting ... and then, holding one another in love, we'll go out and practice *knowing*, within ourselves ... and *being*, for others ... the Jesus Who abides in us, in love.

I do hope each one of you will earnestly, and prayerfully, consider whether you will make this journey of love, with us.



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