

**Sermon Text – Sunday, February 20, 2022 – Pastor Paula Kraus**

**OT Reading: Genesis 45: 3-11, 15;**

**Epistle Reading: I Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50;**

**Scripture for Message: Luke 6:27-38 – “Transformation”**

What do the scriptures we read this morning have in common? Think about that as you listen this morning. From Genesis we would have to recall the story of Joseph, and the conditions present in his life that placed him in the position to offer grace and mercy to his brothers. I mean the story of Joseph is compelling, he seemed to be the favored son of his father Jacob and I wonder if maybe he let his brothers know that while parading around in that ‘colorful’ coat. So, he was arrogant and maybe that is part of the reason his brothers wanted to be rid of him, although the way they went about that was cruel and evil. Through that experience however and the experiences he had in Pharaoh’s court Joseph changed. The experiences transformed Joseph from arrogance to a person who forgave and offered grace to his brothers – he didn’t even demand an apology from them for selling him into slavery!

Then we have Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Certainly, Paul is responding to some questions the people in that church had. Maybe they had just lost one of their faithful members and were wondering about what came next. Maybe too there were some who questioned bodily resurrection. What Paul describes recalls a transformation from the physical perishable body into the imperishable spiritual body in the image of Jesus that God raised to glory. Like a seed planted that dies and transformed into something much greater than and different from a seed.

However, when we get to the scripture from the Gospel of Luke – do we quite know what to make of it. Jesus is still on the plain speaking to the people, meeting them where they are. These words follow the blessings and woes we heard last week. The things Jesus asks here are HARD! It is a natural response when someone throws shade at you to want to respond in kind. We humans can give some snarky responses when confronted with curses or abuse. Often, even when someone is not intending to be unfriendly, we misconstrue meaning and feel offended.

Furthermore, turn the other cheek, not only surrender your cloak but your shirt too – are you kidding Jesus? Most of us want to ball up our fists and fight back giving as good as we get – am I right? You see it on the news reports almost everyday – people screaming at each other for perceived slights, calling the police when someone is different from us, throwing punches on airplanes, shouting

matches that devolve to spitting and slapping, not to mention the things that escalate into workplace violence and school shootings. Maybe similar things were happening in Jesus' time, thus prompting these words – but these words surely influence us today.

Then there is the question that comes to mind after reading the last sentence in this pericope. “A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” These words don't always ring true for us in the present age, goodness often meets with suspicion and hatred. Sometimes we feel like we give and give and never receive anything of value to us in return. When someone does not act in kind, well we sometimes end up with hurt feelings. Sometimes we just feel stuck in judgment and condemnation. As Christians, are we supposed to be passive doormats and continually allow ourselves to be taken for granted?

But that's not what Jesus is talking about at all, you must look at not only what Jesus says here but how he says it. Jesus is talking resistance and radical faith. Jesus is talking about a way of being that is contrary to what we see in the world. Once again Jesus is being counter cultural. Jesus is telling the people then and us now to resist being like the world even when it is hard, even when there is no reciprocity. Jesus' solution is to confront evil with grace and kindness.

Luke lays out Jesus' rationale in verses 32-34, be better than sinners, for if you do nothing more than what the world expects what credit is that to you. These things are hard, but it is the hard things that set Christians outside of the world's expectations. Jesus asks the hard things of us knowing that we are enabled through God's strength to do anything. Notice too that Jesus is not talking about instant rewards and instant gratification. Jesus says do these things expecting nothing in return and your reward WILL BE great, you WILL BE children of the “Most High God”. Verse 37 – “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you.”

Jesus isn't promising this to happen now, just as with the blessings and woes this is a future event. These are instructions for a new way of living and a way better than the rest of the world. Choose life, seek God's blessings, and the reward will be transformation. God's grace will transform us. In fact, it changes us as we treat others with grace and compassion, there will be less anxiety, less hurt feelings, and more peace in our lives.

How can this be true you might ask because the world is still full of meanness and judgment and condemnation? It's true that as we resist this evil and meanness, we resist the urge to reciprocate, and we can let go of the harshness of life the world tries to hand us. The world probably won't change but we will.

These words are reflections of what God would do and that is how Christians are to live in the world doing what God would do [to the best of our abilities anyway].

In Luke's Gospel, the Kingdom Jesus preached and lived was all about a glorious, uproarious, absurd generosity (N. T. Wright in the commentary *Luke for Everyone*. Westminster John Knox press. 2004. p. 72-75). This way of living is like "flowers growing through concrete and startling everyone." But is it possible? I don't think this is a list of instructions, dos, and don'ts that we can complete and be satisfied. This is about an attitude of heart and a "lightness of spirit in the face of all that the world can throw at you" (ibid). This is the God we worship, a God of generosity, a God of incredible mercy and forgiveness.

My husband enjoys a television sit-com about an atheist young man in a strict Southern Baptist family. One episode recently had this young man's twin sister questioning God and asking about atheism. Her Sunday School class has been studying the Old Testament, the story of Moses and the Exodus, and she wonders how anyone can follow a cruel God who would order the massacre of innocent children.

This brings to my mind the fact that there are many people today who are of the same opinion that God is feared, God is gloomy, penny-pinching, punishing, and a God making salvation a near impossible task. There are people in our world today who believe that God would never, could never forgive some sinners – themselves included. Consequently, there are people who have never felt the joy of the God Jesus is illustrating in these examples.

There is a popular believe today that all religions are really the same, that the deities worshipped by other religions are really the same God by different names. But I wonder, this God Jesus illustrates in his Sermon on the Plain is different. N. T. Wright reminds us that "If you lived in a society where everyone believed in this God, there wouldn't be any violence. There wouldn't be any revenge. There wouldn't be any divisions of class or caste. Property and possessions wouldn't be nearly as important as making sure your neighbor was all right. Imagine if even a few people around you took Jesus seriously and lived like that. Life would be exuberant, different, astonishing. People would stare." But is that kind of living even possible today?

Isn't this also illustrative of what the church should be like, after all the church is the 'body of Christ' and thus should be Christ in this world. This is how Jesus himself lived, turning the other cheek, loving, and forgiving even when beaten and stripped and placed on a cross to die. Jesus healed not only friends but also strangers and outcasts. Jesus was the true embodiment of the God of whom he spoke. Can the church be the true embodiment of Jesus?

Is this generous, merciful, and transformative God the God we in the church show the people of the world? How many people do we know who follow this way of living? Even some of our beloved evangelists like James Dobson and Franklin Graham stand in judgment and condemnation of certain lifestyles. Is that following Jesus' words as he instructs the people and his disciples in that assembly? How many communities of faith are there that follow these guidelines for living?

Yes, these things are hard to do, but are they hard because we desire the things of this world more than the Kingdom? Are these things hard because we don't really want to stand out as a church but would rather blend with the world? Are they hard because we choose to remain a lukewarm church rather than embrace the fire of the Holy Spirit?

On the other hand, are these things as hard as we pretend to make them? Jesus tells us that his yoke is easy and his burden light. Scripture assures us that God makes all things possible and that with faith as tiny as a mustard seed we could move mountains. Jesus' instructions here are simple, obvious, clear, and direct. Doing these things will change your life. Doing these things will change the world around you.

How hard is it to resist negativity and respond instead with grace and kindness? How hard is it really to walk away from an argument or settle a dispute with compassion? How hard is it really to assume positive intent and shrug off the things we perceive as slights and insults? How hard is it really to accept criticism given in a loving way – or even when not how hard is it to learn from that. Christianity transforms us, makes us different from the world. We must be examples for the world of what living in the Kingdom of God is like. We are, as members of the church and followers of Christ, already living in a kingdom that is not yet fully realized on earth as it is in heaven.

Where does this start – right here in this church with the people who are sitting beside you, in front of you, and behind you. This is your church family – be kind, be compassionate, offer forgiveness and grace. Do unto others as you would have them do to you even if they don't. Even when it's hard and you're tired or having a bad day. We are Christians but we are humans first – we will make mistakes. This message is for me as much as it is for you. Offer the same grace to others that God offers to you.