

Oh boy, what a gospel reading. Before I say anything else, this is one of the several passages that the historical church and society has used to justify telling wives that they need to stay with abusive partners or that punishing children with violence was ok. I want to make clear; it is highly unlikely that Jesus was telling his followers that these things were ok. That physical violence in relationships was acceptable. That was never Jesus' message.

That said, this is a challenging piece of teaching we are given. I don't know about you, but I find it hard at times to act with love with those I love. It is even harder for me to act with love towards someone I am not fond of, and I suspect that is true for all of us. And now Jesus says, act with love, towards your enemy, those who revile you, those who harm you.

That isn't the only challenge in this passage. Another is Jesus telling us we are to give to those who beg from us. I am uncomfortable when someone begs from me. Part of me wants to give but mostly I expect that it is a scam, that the person will waste my gift. Plus there is the possibility that I will need whatever it is – money, clothing, some other possession – sometime in the future so I hang on to it.

Then there is the troubling, how I judge others is how God will judge me. That I will be forgiven by God in the way I forgive others. That Jesus expects us to be merciful like God is merciful. I could go on but basically, it comes down to the fact that there is not much I want to hear in this passage.

How many of us don't want to hear this passage? How many of us listen hoping to find loopholes, justifications as to why we don't or can't live the life of abundant forgiveness, mercy, and generosity that God **gives to us** and then calls us to live.

A number of years ago, a group gathered to reflect on this scripture. They found themselves trying to get away from the explicit teaching. Attempting to find some kind of loophole that Jesus wasn't really serious in this teaching. There must be another meaning; perhaps this is more like an allegory, something that points to something else. Kind of like Jesus telling his disciples that if they believed enough they could make a mountain pick itself up and move to the left or to the right. After a period of time, these scholars realized they had to accept the passage on its terms. They had to accept that Jesus was serious. This is what Jesus expects from his disciples.

We might argue that if we were to live out this passage it will set us against our culture. His teaching calls us in a very powerful way to respond against what our culture, as well as our instinct or intelligence tells us to do. Plus, living this way puts ourselves at risk -- risk of not having our possessions, not having plenty, not being able to uplift ourselves at the expense of others through our judgments. It puts at risk of harm. And so, it is easy to dismiss this passage as being not for us, not for this time of the world, and not humanly possible.

I don't know about you, but I, on a daily basis, fail to live out this teaching of Jesus. It may only be in my thoughts, but to be honest, our thoughts and judgments color what we do even if in little ways. So where is there hope in this passage for me? For us?

I find hope in looking through the lens of the story of Joseph. In case you don't recall the story -- Joseph is his father's youngest and most definitely favorite son among his many sons. He was the one who got the expensive coat of many colors.

His brothers being jealous decided to do away with him, so when out tending flocks, they threw him in a deep pit to be left for animals to consume. But he was spared that fate when some folks came along. The brothers decided to sell Joseph into slavery. They then told their father Joseph was killed by a wild beast.

Joseph is hauled off to Egypt. Many things happen to him but what saves him is God's gift of being able to interpret dreams. To make this long story shorter, he interprets a dream for the Pharaoh where he says there will be years of feast followed by years of severe famine.

The Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of preparing during the plentiful years for the famine years. So, when the famine hits, there is plenty. The brothers now come hoping to get food for their families not realizing it is their brother who holds their fate in his hands.

Joseph being human doesn't forgive them immediately. Instead, he sends them on their way with the requirement they bring their youngest brother to him. Then he plants silver in their saddle bag. He sends the army after them and brings them back as thieves to be thrown into prison. They were certainly getting what they deserved. That is where what we heard today picks up.

Joseph finds himself overwhelmed with love for his family, and weeping he chooses forgiveness over vengeance, over getting even. Joseph, in knowing God's mercy in his own life, offers mercy to his brothers.

Was it easy? No, his actions at attempting to seek vengeance tell us it was a struggle. Yet God, through Joseph, brought good from evil. And that is the hope. God can do the same through us. God through us can bring good from evil.

We will all struggle to love others, and especially those who we judge to be difficult or to be our enemies.

We struggle to live out promises we make at every baptism: to seek and serve Christ in all persons; and to respect the dignity of every human being. Yet God's mercy is with us, and in knowing that mercy perhaps we will be able to extend that to others.

Part of me says great, I want to be able to extend God's mercy to my enemies, those I don't like, those I judge to be difficult. At the same time there is part of me that says, no way. But just perhaps working towards offering love, offering mercy -- is what **we can** embrace.

In the book, *The Taste of New Wine*, Keith Miller reminded readers that Jesus taught his followers that we are to love God more than anything and anyone. I remember thinking -- I don't want to -- I like things as they are. I like loving David more than God. In fact, I checked, and I had written that in the margin.

Miller then went on to write, that if we don't want to love God more than anyone or anything else, we should give God permission to change our hearts. Tell God if you want me to be different it's on you to change my heart.

And that, I think, is what we can do regarding respecting the dignity and worth of all humans, even those who hurt us, those we can't extend mercy towards at this time. We can give God permission to change our hearts. We can trust that God can work in and through us -- so we grow more and more into loving others, into extending mercy, as Christ, and as God, extends mercy to us.

A friend of mine and fellow priest, Fr Chris Arnold, wrote regarding this passage, and I quote

"Love your enemies," says Jesus. And all this time we've made excuses for why we don't. Because we can't, and we don't want to anyway. After all, love is costly. It demands vulnerability, and we barely risk vulnerability even with our closest and dearest. So we won't love our enemies, thank you very much. Our enemies have hurt us and those we love, and

when they make amends and change their ways then they will deserve our love. Jesus, you're great and all, but what you ask is simply impossible and naive."

He continues, "Only, there are two options for changing the world and they are love and violence. Violence is the option to choose if we only want the strongest to survive. Love is the option to choose if we want everyone to survive. Love is the option if you want to survive."

He ends with: "So, God only knows how we'll do it, but let's at least desire the option of love, even if we can't be there yet."

It is hard to act with love towards those who challenge us. But as hard as it can be it can be done even when there is horrible pain for the person offering mercy. Two stories I have carried with me encourage my faith that this love, this mercy, is possible for us as humans.

When we were at the 1998 Lambeth Conference where the Anglican bishops and spouses from around the world gather every 10 or so years there was an African woman who was a bishop's spouse. She told of her life. She is a Tutsi and her husband a Hutu.

During their country's civil war her husband's brothers killed all of her relatives because they were of the wrong tribe. They were later tried and sentenced to prison. Now in her country, prisoners must have someone bring food for them. The prison does not provide that. She made the commitment to pray every day for them and to faithfully bring food to her husband's family who harmed her family.

Why does she do this? Because she says she believes Jesus' words are true that one should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

The second story is from an anonymous prisoner of Ravensbruck concentration camp. This was left next to the body of a dead child.

"O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have brought, thanks to this suffering – our comradeship; our loyalty; our courage; our generosity; the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this' and when they come to judgment, let all the faults which we have borne be their forgiveness."

That is my hope that God, can change my heart.

That God, through me, can bring good from evil.

That I can live a life of this radical love, abundant mercy, forgiveness, and generosity.

And, that my faults that others have borne will be my forgiveness.