

## Sermon Transcript

### A Gospel of Love

**Genesis 45:3-11, 15 and Luke 6:27-38 | Seventh Sunday After Epiphany |  
February 23, 2025 | Pastor John Klawiter, preaching**

Grace and peace to you my friends in Christ,

Have you ever had one of those conversations where something was said that was so harsh that you had to get up and leave the room?

When we hear the sermon on the plain, it's very likely that the words that Jesus said caused people to stand up and walk out.

It was too much. Too far. Too difficult to accept.

When he says, "woe to you who are rich... woe to you who are full, laughing, or when people speak well of you."

I think people got up and left.

Why? Because the next line he says is this:

27 "But I say to you who are listening:

Which is one way to translate the Greek. But another option, as suggested by retired professor Sarah Henrich, is to emphasize the present participle. Which makes it:

But I say to you if you are STILL listening.

Those of you who've stuck around, it's about to get even harder. Jesus says: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you."

And our first response is to put conditions on that. Like the crowd, I'm sure they thought "surely not the ROMANS. I hope not, right???"

The Romans are their oppressors. If a Roman soldier is in your presence, they're justified to strike.

If a Roman soldier asks for food, clothing, shelter, Jesus is saying to give.

What Jesus is telling those who are still listening is that responding to those, especially who have the authority to behave this way, with a violent response is not hurting the other person. It's hurting ourselves. It's deepening the hatred and darkness in our own hearts.

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This reading is hard. It's not telling us to be a pushover. It's not encouraging us to blindly suffer or to accept abuse.

But if we internalize that hate, let it fester, we become like the one we're oppressed by.

When I was working in the back office in the mutual funds world (SLIDE of Back Office), I finally got my big break. I was the lead as we consulted with a larger bank in the South.

This bank had done things the wrong way and me and my team were called in to help them fix the errors. I was young, green, and excessively confident. My mindset in those days was pretty clear: I couldn't show weakness or admit that I didn't know something to a client.

I also couldn't go into their system and fix the errors myself—I didn't have that level of access, which was probably a good thing. So each day, I would send over instructions to their supervisor so he could input what I told him into the program to correct the mistakes that my team found.

Some days, there would be a lot of emails. When we'd come into the office the next day, it was clear that all of the work wasn't getting completed. This was a huge setback—it would mean the errors were still there and we'd have to request the corrections again—which ran the risk of duplication and making an even bigger mess.

The supervisor, who'd been in this industry for many years, wasn't exactly enthusiastic to get called out for errors that his team made. He would get chippy. He definitely did not have the incentive for US to look good because that meant he looked worse.

My team would complain about him and how difficult he made things.

Finally, one day, as we completed our daily team conference call, my frustration boiled over and I called him out for not doing the things I needed. I spoke to him in a flattering way and was condescending.

Thinking I was justified in my response, when we hung up the call, I expected the team to agree with me. That's when our project manager, Janice, ripped into me.

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While I may have been right, it wasn't my place to speak to a him—a client, as well as a much experienced leader in their company, like that. It was a humbling moment.

While the other supervisor was certainly not an “enemy”, it rarely felt like we were working on the same team.

I wasn't told to apologize. I didn't recall any moments of reconciliation or forgiveness happening. But her stern warning gave me a better way forward. As an employee, but also as a person. I owned my own part in the project and could only provide the information and then document it when it wasn't done.

I never called him out publicly again. But I also didn't sit next to him the next time we were in town and went out for dinner.

We might think that the Bible is full of clean stories with happy endings on how we should behave and that are easy to model.

Think again. One of the WORST stories about forgiveness is the one often lifted up as the model—how Joseph, sold into slavery, finds it in his heart to forgive them when the power structure turns to his favor.

It's a story about people and generational trauma attached to decisions.

Old Testament scholar Cameron Howard wrote something very provocative:

I want to offer a deliberately skeptical counter-reading of Joseph's character. Rather than being a “good guy” with complicating character twists and occasional missteps, consider in what ways Joseph is a “bad guy” with whom we are nonetheless encouraged to sympathize because of his larger role in the story of God's journey with Israel.

Why does Howard take this approach? Maybe it's because of who Joseph shows us he is.

Rather than reconciliation, Joseph meets his brothers with manipulation. He pretends not to know them, accuses them of spying, throws them all in jail for three days, and demands that after they take their grain home, they return to Egypt with Benjamin, their youngest brother. He even has Simeon bound and held in Egypt to guarantee their return. He sneaks the money they paid for the grain back into their sacks, surely a gesture of generosity but understood by the

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brothers, terrified of the powerful governor and racked with guilt, as a sure indication that stealing will be added to their spying charges.

Rather than reveal his identity now, Joseph has his own silver cup slipped into Benjamin's sack, setting him up for a charge of stealing.

Multiple times, Joseph has turned aside to weep privately, but those deeply held feelings have not stopped him from testing and otherwise manipulating his brothers. It's when he thinks his father, Jacob, might die from the grief, that he reveals himself (SLIDE of Joseph/brothers).

Joseph has the power in this story. He controls the food. Hoards the grain and gets to decide who can buy it and at what price, while the entire world is suffering from a famine.

Once powerless at the bottom of a pit, outnumbered by brothers who hated him, Joseph now gets to decide who will live and who will die. Having that power does not necessarily make Joseph a bad guy, but his use of that power to control those around him surely does, no matter how much he cries.

Joseph forgives the wrongs done to him by his brothers, but he plays on their fears and exploits his imperial power over them. The brothers remain terrified of the brother they wronged long after this scene we read today. That persistent fear will continue to indicate Joseph's power over his brothers, not reconciliation with them.

How might Jesus interpret that scene? Don't you think Jesus would be critical of the mind games Joseph unleashes on them? How can you love your neighbor if you insist upon holding fear and threats over them?

That's not doing unto others as you would have them do to you.

Thankfully, I learned from my experience working with the unhelpful bank supervisor. When my own abuse of power was pointed out to me, I realized that wasn't how I wanted to be seen. There was a better way to respond—and it didn't involve putting on a fake smile and pretending to be friends with someone.

I say to you if you are STILL listening. LOVE

Love your enemies—agape love, you don't have to like them, but show empathy. We are in control of our response. Pray for your enemies. Pray that they are praying for you.

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Do you want to know what's the most demoralizing thing for your enemy to see? Responding to hate and fear with peace and confidence.

Gathered in this holy space, we are many minds. Many voices. Many opinions. But we are united in one spirit. We depend on the person sitting next to us when we are being oppressed, when we are being torn down, hurt, or filled with fear. We don't face that alone. We don't retaliate with evil in our hearts.

It's not easy. It's the hardest lesson of all. But loving our enemies isn't about correcting their behavior. It's about being aware of our behavioral response... and loving them anyway. Amen.