

Jesus said “Love your enemies, and pray for those who abuse you.” Another way to phrase Jesus’ call is not to “return evil for evil,” but return good for evil. Love means taking the “higher road.” (Since our church is on High Street, we can remind ourselves to take the High Road whenever possible!). We won’t stoop to the level of trading insult for insult, getting revenge, shedding blood for blood. But we follow Jesus by taking the “High Road,” that shows grace and goodness, even for enemies, forgiving and praying for them.

We won’t make the mistake of saying that Jesus advocates tolerating abuse and staying in abusive relationships. Nor does Jesus say that we can turn enemies into friends. Jesus did speak of wiping the dust off your feet and moving on, when peace is not possible! Love can set clear boundaries, and choose to end relationships. But for those with whom we choose to have a relationship, truth telling and forgiving are central to keep a healthy relationship. Love will tell the **truth!** We know that sometimes those closest to us can best witness to a truth we need to hear. Sometimes the truth shows a need for change. Jesus said that the truth will set us free, but we may need to change before we can really be free. In the greater society, Love will put a stop to behavior and laws that are unjust or abusive.

The biblical story of Joseph is a famous example of the “high road” of love, since it ultimately is a story of **forgiveness**. Probably most of us are familiar with the Broadway play “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.” Young Joseph, favored son of his father, had dreams of his own future greatness, that one day his brothers would bow down before him. Out of jealousy and hatred, they threw him into a deep pit to die, but then later sold him as a slave to some nomadic traders who take him to Egypt. There, his

gift at dream interpretation cause him to be elevated to second in command next to Pharaoh, ruler over all the land of Egypt. During a famine, his brothers come to Egypt looking for food. Joseph is able to give them grain, and eventually he embraces them, weeping, and forgiving them. Forgiveness is perhaps the highest expression of love. Forgiveness is central to Jesus' ministry, and even on the cross he said, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do!"

Anytime Christians discuss Jesus' scriptures about forgiving and "loving enemies," people always say how *hard* it is to forgive! Hurt lingers, and too often the perpetrator does not offer any apology! To err is human, but to forgive is divine, so it can take a long time to forgive, or sometimes we can't achieve that high road at all. There is a French saying, "to forgive all is to understand all." But we know that we can never understand all, understand why people hurt other people. We can never have complete empathy, complete understanding, so it is no wonder that we too often retaliate, too often return evil for evil.

Again, the Joseph story can be a great role model for love as **forgiveness**. Joseph could have let his Israelite brothers starve as pay back for their jealous attack on him. He could have said, I'll give them a taste of their own medicine and throw them all in a pit 10 times deeper! Joseph's forgiving his brothers was not immediate, however; it was actually a bit of a process. The story is long and complicated, and Joseph had to excuse himself several times to be alone and weep. In short, the story relates that Joseph actually "tested" his brothers. At first he "treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them" and called them spies. Then he put them temporarily in prison, as they had done to him. Then, in a very complex manner, he tested their compassion for their youngest brother Benjamin and for their old father who said he would die if he

lost Benjamin as he had lost Joseph. (Joseph was craftily testing if they could have had more compassion on himself when he was the favored young son! They passed the test, showing both contrition for what they had done to Joseph, and compassion for young Benjamin. One brother even offered to stay in prison instead of Benjamin, showing a kind of “Christlike” sacrifice, if Joseph would let young Benjamin go free. If you want all the details, read Genesis Chapters 42-45!)

The grand finale comes in Chapter 45 when before Joseph reveals himself his brothers. But before he does that, he goes off by himself to weep again, so loudly that the whole household of Pharaoh heard him. Joseph had to be honest about his own journey of pain and loss before he could fully reunite with his family. Joseph had a lot to get off his chest, a lot of residual bitterness and anger to, a lot to turn over to God. It can be a comfort to us when Jesus calls us to forgive to remember that it can be a process. One minister’s young daughter put it simply once to her parents, saying “No, I’m just not ready to forgive yet!” Forgiveness may be one of the highest forms of love, but with deep hurt, it can be a “long road” to forgiveness.

Another prime example of love as forgiveness, at a societal level, are the words of Martin Luther King that we hear often this month. He was clear about loving white people, forgiving them, while at the same time using nonviolent resistance to change the Jim Crow laws that segregate black and white, and to stop abuses the lynchings. We remember that Malcolm X advocated using more force or retaliatory violence to stop the injustices. But Martin Luther King’s way was indeed the high road, following the way of Jesus, the way of loving, forgiving and praying for enemies, the way of peacemaking and diplomacy over the way of war.

In the story of Joseph, another key lesson is that he learns how to look at the **bigger picture**, to see that God can bring good out of evil. Joseph said to his brothers, “You may have planned evil towards me, by throwing me into a deep pit, but God has used it for ultimate good.” The bigger picture is expressed by Paul in Romans: “We know that *in all things*, God works for good with those who love God.”

Love, divine love, is always healing, transforming, redeeming, forgiving, working for good, in all God’s people. We cannot ever fully realize this kind of love here on earth, for we are earthen vessels, pots made of clay. But we can always be striving for the ideals of Jesus’ love, and praying to receive and share that love. Here is a song, a prayer really, that acknowledges how difficult it is to forgive, and that we need God’s help to do so. It is called “The Healing of the Heart,” by a wise soul named Ken Medema:

1. *Pathways are chosen and years go by. Feelings get frozen, tear-ducts run dry. It's time to move on now, so I'll try to forget all the ways that you hurt me, all the rage and regret. **Refrain: Where, do we begin? And how do we even start, to walk across that long, long bridge on the road to forgiveness and the healing of the heart?*** 2. *There’s a room that's been damaged in the house of my soul. So I try not to go there when it's lonely and cold. I blacken the windows and pretend I don't care. And I seal all the doorways; I pretend it's not there. **Refrain.*** 3. *How did we get here, standing face to face on this bridge that could crumble beneath us ... such a dangerous place! We reach out our hands now, so fragile, so frail! Oh God, are you with us, and what if we fail? **Refrain.***