

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

SHERARD EDINGTON

Luke 6:27-38

The Old Testament overflows with accounts of people who demonstrate an exceptional application of their faith within their lives. One of these is the saga found in the book of Genesis which tells us of the life of Joseph. Joseph was the great-grandson of Abraham. His father was Jacob (who was later renamed Israel). Joseph was one of the youngest of Jacob's twelve sons. Because Joseph's mother was Rachel, the wife that Jacob loved the most, Joseph acted as if he, even though he was not the oldest, possessed the highest status of any of his half-brothers. He was also very annoying. He would tell his brothers about his dreams in which the brothers all bowed down to him. He would tattle on their work deficiencies to their father. It didn't help that their father Jacob gave Joseph a special garment to wear that was nicer than the clothes of the brothers.

So, fed up with Joseph's self-importance, the brothers decided to rid themselves of this pest and to murder Joseph. Reuben, one of the older brothers, objected to this fratricide, so instead, the brothers sold Joseph as a slave to a caravan headed to Egypt.

Once in Egypt, Joseph landed in prison. However, he comes to the attention of the Pharaoh because of his God-given ability to interpret dreams. Once out of prison, Joseph is made an administrator for the king. He rises quickly through the ranks until he became the chief administrator for all of Egypt. He was the pharaoh's right-hand man in charge of all domestic affairs.

As administrator, Joseph had a vision in which he foresaw seven years of bountiful harvests. This period of agricultural plenty would be followed by seven years of drought and famine. Joseph implemented a nation-wide food storage program so that when the famine hit, Egypt would be prepared. And they were.

The effects of the famine were felt far beyond the borders of Egypt, even down into Israel. Joseph's brothers in Israel were forced to travel to Egypt to buy food for themselves and their herds. To make this purchase, they needed to appear before the chief administrator—their brother Joseph. The brothers, however, did not recognize Joseph. Many years had passed. He now spoke Egyptian, he wore eyeliner, he drove a chariot, and he walked like this. Joseph, however, recognized his brothers, and after some dramatic episodes, we are sure that Joseph is going to get his revenge. Because he is so powerful, literally, with the snap of his fingers, he could have made his family disappear in the desert just as they had made him disappear so many years earlier. Talk about justice! Who could blame him?

But Joseph does not extract revenge. Instead, he reveals himself to his brothers (who are understandably terrified), and he embraces them and kisses them. He tells them to go home and gather all they have—their families, their possessions, their herds and flocks, and return to Egypt. The famine will last several more years, and he will give land in Egypt to settle on. The brothers do as they are instructed and their descendants thrive for generations in Egypt.

Joseph demonstrates a remarkable level of forgiveness toward his brothers. In doing so, it can be argued that he changed history. His family in Egypt would become the Hebrews who would then become the Israelites. Joseph's forgiveness was good. He recognized God in his life, and he acted appropriately. He demonstrated what it is like to live as a child of God. He did not succumb to the desire for revenge. Although God would not deliver the law and commandments to Moses for another several hundred years, Joseph shows what it means to live a life centered on God.

For us as Christians, we see Joseph's forgiveness reflected in the teachings of Jesus, such as what we see in our reading for today.

Our reading from the gospel of Luke is part of a passage that we know as the Sermon on the Plain. This sermon is a collection of Jesus' teachings that form the heart of the message of Luke's gospel. What we find here are an assemblage of commands that when taken seriously should make us quite uncomfortable.

However, before we look at these commands, I would like to jump to the conclusion of our reading. Here we find a parable that describes the end result of obeying Jesus' teachings. The parable says, *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.*

What this parable describes is a simple transaction in the marketplace. Let's say you need to purchase a basket of grain. You go to the market where the going rate for grain is \$5 a basket. You approach a vendor and pay the \$5. The vendor then takes their basket and fills it to the top with grain, and then pours that grain into your apron to be carried home. Normally, that would end the transaction. But this market is different. In this market, the vendor takes the filled basket and before pouring the grain into your apron they shake it until all the grain has settled making room for more grain. Then, they push down on that grain to make it even more compact. Then they top off the basket until it is overflowing. So, you don't get a level basket, you get a heaping basket. You go home happy. The parable teaches that what we give in this life is what we can expect back. But in God's kingdom, we shall receive an abundance.

Before we look at the teachings in this passage, it is important to note how this reading begins. It starts with Jesus saying, *But I say to you that listen.* This tells us

that these are not blanket commands for the world. No, these are intended for the Christ-followers, for those who have come to Jesus and who are willing to listen to him, who are willing to change their lives. What we find here are eight statements that turn the tide on human behavior. They contradict logic as we know it. Here they are:

*Love your enemies,
do good to those who hate you,
bless those who curse you,
pray for those who abuse you.
If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also;
and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.
Give to everyone who begs from you;
and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.*

What kind of world would this be if people acted like this? The rules of society tell us that we should hate our enemies, after all they are our enemies. We should try and hurt them at every chance. If someone curses us, we should curse them back—return finger for finger. If someone strikes us, we should smack them in return. Our honor is at stake. But in Jesus' impractical world, we are told to love our enemies, and do good things to those who aim to bring us harm. We pray for those who harm us. If someone takes our jacket, we should hand over our shirt as well. We give to anyone who begs of us, and if someone takes our stuff, we shouldn't ask for it back. All this is summarized in the statement, *Do to others as you would have them do to you*. It is not difficult to imagine that Jesus had the Joseph story in his heart as he offers these words. Joseph treats his brothers as he wished they had treated him.

What Jesus is doing is calling for a realignment of the heart, a new way of relating to the world. In our lives today, enemies are a dime-a-dozen. We've got vaxxers and anti-vaxxers, maskers and anti-maskers, Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals, pro-gun and anti-gun, coastal elites and middle America, Alabama football fans versus pretty much everyone else. We are miserable being so divided. It is like Jesus could see into the future, and he's calling us to heal our divisions.

Next, we come to the section about sinners. Sinners are not necessarily evil people. They are regular, ordinary folk. Without Christ, all people are sinners. Jesus explains that even sinners love those who love them; sinners reciprocate good deeds to those who are good to them; sinners gladly lend money to those they expect to pay them back. Sinners follow the rules of society. Their expectation is that they will treat them in the same way that they treat others.

But Christ-followers, on the other hand, are called to lift themselves above that of sinners. They are called to love everyone, even—and especially—their enemies.

They are to lend but expect nothing in return. They are called to live a new and radical reality based on a love that is free, not a love that is transactional.

And the reward for their lifestyle will not be glory or riches or power. It will be to join the ranks of the children of God. These children of God are merciful, they do not judge, they are forgiving, and they are generous. They live in the kingdom—a place defined by the abundance of life.

In the Dari language of Afghanistan, there is an ancient proverb. The proverb says, “The naked don't fear the water.” The water in this case refers to rivers. If you are a traveler traveling by foot, then crossing a river—fording a river—can be extremely treacherous. You might slip and fall, you might step into a hole, you might be knocked over by the force of the water. It's hard to know what will happen when you cross a river. Whatever you are carrying at the time could be lost and swept away. But the proverb tells us that if you carry nothing, if you strip naked, the river can take nothing from you. “The naked don't fear the water.”

In our reading Jesus is calling those who will listen to strip off the burden of the expectations of sinners and society. They are to abandon the calculus of reciprocity and instead treat each person with generosity, forgiveness, and love. When they can do that, they will enjoy the overflowing abundance of God's kingdom. They shall be children of God.