

2025 Epiphany 7C

I may have told you all this story already, but it bears repeating.

While I was in seminary I had a classmate of another faith. She had little experience with Christians when she arrived—to this day I still don't fully understand how she ended up there with us—and so she was frequently asking questions about things we had heard since childhood and just took for granted. She was constantly challenging our assumptions about what a particular passage really *meant*. As frustrating as this could sometimes be, it was a gift. Studying the New Testament with her in the room prepared us for the many, many, conversations we would find ourselves in years to come.

But my, oh my, did she dislike the words of Jesus we heard today.

“How can I love my *enemy*?!” she would say. “How can I forgive the harm that has been done to me and my people over the centuries?! It would be an insult to the memory of my ancestors. I will never forget. I will never forgive.”

I tried to explain to her that forgiving does not require forgetting. It is not denying the real harm that was done.

It is not letting people do whatever they want without consequences.

Forgiveness is never pretending that you weren't harmed in some way. It's not giving the one who hurt you free reign to continue abusing you.

Forgiveness is making the decision to no longer allow what happened to you in the past define who you are now. Forgiveness is not actually for the benefit of the other person. It's about your own liberation.

If you imagine the harm as a rope tying oppressor and oppressed together, forgiveness is cutting your end of the rope so that you can step away, no longer bound. Forgiveness is about claiming freedom for yourself. Freedom from the power they held over you that allowed them to harm you. Freedom to be who you decide to become (ideally, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit).

I'm not pretending this always easy. Some hurts may take a lifetime to release. It can be unsettling to let go of the hurt because you're not entirely sure who you are without it. In my friend's case, it was so much a part of her cultural identity to 'never forget' what was done, that she looked at every situation through a particular set of lenses. She had a perpetual chip on her shoulder, and she made assumptions about people's motives,

interpreting their words and actions through a hermeneutic of suspicion and resentment.

That's no way to live.

So what's the alternative?

Well, Jesus had something to say about that, too. It's one of those "simple but not easy" answers.

Love everyone. *Everyone*. Even—especially—your enemy.

Again, loving your enemy doesn't mean laying down and letting the tanks roll over you. It's not submission to whatever they want.

We can love our enemies and still put all our energy into resisting them and their vision for the world. We can love our enemies and still protect our borders. We can love our enemies and still hold them accountable for their actions. We can even love our enemies and still not want to have any contact or ongoing relationship with them.

Loving your enemy is choosing, again and again and again, to treat that person in ways that are consistent with Christ's values. Loving your enemy is refusing to let their vitriol or hatred or violence infect you. Loving your

enemy means working for justice and peace, believing that God even has a space for them, if they are willing to repent and join us in the kingdom of God.

At the end of one of our intense conversations about what all this Gospel stuff means, my friend said, with great exasperation, “I could NEVER be a Christian! Never!” When I asked her why—expecting her answer to be, “Because you have caused my people such harm over the years” or “Because you’re all a bunch of hypocrites!”—she floored me by saying, “Because you have to love everyone!”

You know, I think it many ways she understands what it really means to be Christian better than a good many of the people who claim that title for themselves.

To be a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, is to love everyone.

It takes a lifetime to figure out how to do that.

I used the collect for today from *A New Zealand Prayer Book* in Compline the other night, and the response it elicited from the participants made me think maybe I need to share it with all of you, as well. So let us pray.

Grant us Jesus,
that tender, indestructible love
which asks forgiveness of its executioners
and gives hope to the thief on the cross.
Keep us compassionate when the way is hard,
and gentle with those who oppose us;
for the glory of your holy name.
Amen.