

February 20, 2022

The 7th Sunday after the Epiphany

The Rev. Laurel Coote

St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church

The Netflix show, *Sweet Magnolias*, is set in the fictitious small town of Serenity, South Carolina and tells the story of three women, Maddie, Dana Sue and Helen. They are best friends since high school who shepherd one another through the complexities of romance, career and family. Just as the three prepare to open a new spa in their small hometown, Maddie's longtime rival, Mary Vaughn, (now the Mayor's wife!) attempts to throw the grand opening into chaos by moving the High School baseball team fundraiser to the same night and time.

Furious, and worried that the spa opening will be a bust, Maddie confronts Mary Vaughn, she questions her motives, and suggests that it is an old wound from when they were 16 and in high school that keeps festering. Mary Vaughn is having none of it. She responds with vicious defense and stands her ground, eager to see her adversary suffer, the way she feels she has suffered. Maddie leaves in frustration.

We may have experienced disagreements like this with our own families or with our friends. Perhaps we have witnessed how old issues that have never been resolved fester below the surface and then resurface, as if they were brand new.

Our propensity to want to be right, or to have our way, or to get back at those who have hurt us is part of being human, but not the pretty part.

In our Collect today, we offered a prayer to our God of Kindness. We asked God to help us to break our vicious cycles of resentment and revenge, and to teach us to walk in the ways of forgiveness; to help us to be the people Jesus is calling us to be. We pray, because we can't do this alone. We need one another's support, and we need God's help.

In today's gospel Jesus has a lesson for us: and it is that to be fully in relationship with God and other people, we should act toward others precisely as we wish them to act towards us. He affirms if we would do just this one thing, all of the other issues would work themselves out. It's hard to imagine it is that simple, because it is that hard. We know what it is to have our trust broken; we have lived through difficult times of being wronged or blamed by others. Still, Jesus lays out that we must love those who hate us, harm us, or betray us.

“So that you can hear what I am saying, I want to be clear, Jesus is saying the exact opposite of “allow yourself to be a victim of another person. Victims of physical and/or emotional abuse can come to a place of forgiveness, but as Jesus defines that, it means being able to pray for that person.”

In his book on forgiveness, William Countryman explains Jesus' words further, saying, “to forgive an abuser means to cease to wish harm on them and then to hand them fully over to God. This is God's gift to the victim. God takes from the victim the weight of continually thinking about the abuser. God wants victims to turn towards freedom, to begin to survive and to heal.”

Forgiveness is hard work. For some, it is harder than it is for others. Yet, we all have some measure of forgiveness work to do. Perhaps we have carried a low-level resentment that evolved into pure disdain or dislike for someone; maybe we've been hurt or betrayed, taken advantage of, or ignored, and that has made us angry. The breadth and depth of our hurts can run deep — but Jesus emphasizes that holding on to our hurts and resentments, and using them as weapons against or for power over another ultimately hurts us in the long run, often more than it hurts them.

People have said to me, “I know I am supposed to forgive so and so, but I will never trust them again.” I have said the same words in my life. Because once lost, trust is difficult to restore. I don’t know about you, but I’ve come to God and said, “Ok, I’m done with this resentment. I’m turning this person over to you!” And just a short while later, that resentment arises again. And I have to turn to God again. The thing is: we have made a covenant with God to turn towards every human being in love, to see the Christ in them, just as Christ is in us. This means that we must practice forgiveness in all matters, small and large, especially when we would rather turn our head the other way. The truth of the matter that Jesus wants us to get is that when we don’t forgive others, that is, when we harbor ill will, or animosity, or anything other than love, our souls are weighed down. We become burdened, and the resentments begin to have power over us, affecting what we do and how we feel.

Calling us to turn from our own ways, to the ways of God, Jesus emphasizes that when we model our love for others on God’s love for us, relationship, reconciliation and restoration can be ours. This is an abundance of love that cannot be measured, love so abundant that our fears and vulnerability can slip away. Because, in letting go of our anger, resentment, and self-righteousness — we free ourselves. The stress, sorrow and burden of broken relationship no longer has power over us. And then, we are freed to not only love more generously, we are freed to be able to receive love too.

At the end of that episode of Sweet Magnolias, Maddie shows up on Mary Vaughn’s doorstep, and is once again greeted with contempt. Yielding, Maddie presents two gift baskets for the baseball fundraiser, and then, in a show of generosity, offers Mary Vaughn a personal gift of body scrub, as she expresses how she hopes the fundraiser will be successful. Mary Vaughn is speechless, caught by surprise and completely uncertain of what to do next.

In this moment, perhaps only for this moment, Maddie chooses to let go of her resentment, to extend kindness and to attempt to bridge relationship. In our lesson from Genesis, we witness how Joseph who was sold into slavery by his brothers, and had sufficient reason to want revenge, chose to remember God’s graciousness and mercy toward him, and then chose to extend the same graciousness and mercy, to extend forgiveness, to his brothers. The result was that Joseph got his family back, and they learned what it was to be forgiven.

This is the choice we have every day — the choice to break the vicious cycles of our resentments, so that we can be free to love and be loved. We get to choose to pray for those we dislike, those we find difficult to love; to bless others with generosity and kindness, especially when it is difficult; to be compassionate with others as God is compassionate with us. Every day, we get to choose to seek common ground and to build relationship up, rather than tear it down. What is required is that we be willing to let go of our resentments. And if need be, to let go again, and again.

Jesus reminds us clearly that God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked, and that includes those we dislike, and it includes those who dislike us. And if we are honest, it includes us from time to time too.

So, practice. Practice being merciful and forgiving; practice not judging or condemning others; and when you fail, try again. Help one another, and never forget that God is with you. Jesus says, “a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.” Love as best you can, and love will be yours.