

“On What’s Big” (20Feb22)
1Cor15:35-38,42-50; Luke6:27-38;
Genesis45:3-11,15; Psalm37:1-11,39-40

We may as well start by noting that God will raise the dead. This transformation will be something like comparing a plant to the seed from which it grows—a fun image for you gardeners already readying seeds for spring and envisioning green leaves reaching, spreading, branching out later in the season. Quite a difference and quite unpredictable from seeing a seed.

Or again, a notion that in resurrection you’ll shine like a star, even though when Paul wrote he hadn’t the faintest idea of stars as fusion centers, big enough a million earths could fit into a single one the size of our sun. Again, that’s quite a transformation anticipated in resurrection, like from little ol’ you to the sun beaming.

In the big picture, this is what we expect from God, the promise for our lives and the destination of our universe. Exactly how, we don’t know. But big!

It’s helpful to start there because otherwise other things could seem bigger than they actually are overall. This is more like: Objects in mirror are smaller than they appeared.

So Jesus tells you to love your enemies. In the longer Sermon on the Mount, he says it once. But in this plain ol’ sermon, he reiterates: love your enemies. I say to you listening: love your enemies.

If you’re like me, that’s not appealing, whether it calls to mind somebody you dislike, or who has hurt you, or the variety of harms threatening you personally or us collectively.

So, again, maybe it’s helpful to hold that loving your enemies is less transformation than the bigness of resurrection. If the entire renewal of life is God’s end result, then a byproduct of you loving your enemies might not be inconceivable.

To see the possibility, let’s glance back to the example in Genesis. Sibling relationships in the book of Genesis begin on a bad note, with murder between the first pair of brothers. One infamous twin was named a cheater from birth, proving it by stealing his brother’s inheritance then fearing the retribution. There’s also rivalry and taking

advantage of parents and so on. That may lower our expectations.

Or make today more surprising for the transformation. Stories of siblings in Genesis conclude with Joseph. He began always bragging about being the favorite, and his older brothers got sick of it. The ten of them, first wanting to kill him, threw him in a pit to get rid of him, later deciding they could get a few bucks out of the deal by selling him to some traveling salesman. (I’m not clear if 20 pieces of silver is a buyers- or sellers-market on the price for an annoying little sibling). The brothers convinced their father Joseph was dead. And that was essentially that for over a dozen years.

In the meantime, through other ups and downs, Joseph became the second-in-command to the Pharaoh of Egypt, and prepared for a massive famine. As our passage picked up today, it’s the second year of the famine, and Joseph’s siblings have come twice from Palestine to Egypt to buy food, but they still haven’t recognized Joseph (maybe having forgotten about him or not expecting him to be in such place and position after all those years).

When Joseph reveals who he actually is, the brothers are reasonably terrified that the now-incredibly powerful Joseph will be eager for revenge. But somehow it’s not an eye for an eye retaliation, not retribution but love of enemies that sneaks through for Joseph, transformed for reconciliation, undergirded by a belief in God’s efforts on behalf of life.

It’s also fair to mention that Joseph wasn’t fully transformed. The famine continued for another five years, and he abused it for gain of extraordinary wealth, and later in exchange for grain he took the people’s lands and enslaved them, an extortion of their very lives. He came around to his brothers, but he’s sure not perfect, or merciful as God is merciful.

I don’t know if that makes him more or less relatable for your life and your attempts to love your enemies.

To move forward from Joseph, we have other examples witnessing to the transformative

possibilities of loving enemies, including through the Civil Rights Movement.

I've always found a Martin Luther King statement wise and helpful. He said

I'm very happy that [Jesus] didn't say like your enemies, because it is pretty difficult to like some people... But Jesus says love them, and love is greater than like. Love is understanding, redemptive, creative, goodwill for all [people],⁺

not magnifying hate, but nonviolently resisting evil by joining love, the principle that stands at the center of the cosmos.

John Lewis, a prime practitioner of King's methods, similarly wrote:

When we set our minds against one another... This is a misappropriation of our energy and a depletion of our inner resources. That is why war does not work, why hatred is a burden, why putting others down cannot free us... Our condemnation of others only delays the coming of that day when we finally understand we must put our strife aside and awaken to our true union with one another, no matter how different we might believe one another to be. And when we accept ourselves as brothers and sisters... The majesty of Creation opens to us, and we begin to perceive the vastness of the universe, [and] the infinity of human possibility.[^]

One more from bell hooks: "I believe wholeheartedly that the only way out of domination is love... to be participating in every aspect of your life as a sacrament of love."[>]

These are great and a grand ultimate vision. But I also have to say: Even though we've seen this sacrament of love in action, and we know the inspiring stories of transformations in lives and society, although we believe the possibility, it seems I keep falling short. When the Psalm says "Refrain from anger, leave rage alone; do not be provoked; it leads only to evil" I understand and comprehend it as right and true, but don't get there with every aspect of my life.

So when I'm not great even at loving those I want to love, much less my enemies, I keep turning back to the God who loves me, and who has promised to raise us all, beyond hatred and strife and everything that has hurt us, redeeming and

reuniting us as family, raising us to new life. My part may be small and imperfect, so I'm grateful God's picture is bigger than that.

Hymn: In Christ There Is No East or West (ELW 650)

⁺ in *Testament of Hope*, p47, 11

[^] *Across That Bridge*, p202-203

[>] cited in *The Christian Century*, 1/12/22, p9