

## Golden

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany - February 20, 2022

Texts: Psalm 37, Luke 6:27-38, Genesis 45:3-11, 15

### PSALM READING                      Psalm 37

Do not fret because of people who behave wickedly; do not envy those who do wrong.

They will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herbs.

Trust in the One who is Good, and do good yourself;  
then you will live in the land and enjoy security.

Take delight in the One who delights in you, who will give you your heart's desires.

Commit your way to the One who is trustworthy, who will act on your behalf.

Be still before the Beloved, and wait patiently;  
do not fret over those who prosper by using evil devices.

Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it leads only to evil.

Those who wait for the Gracious One shall inherit the land.

The steadfast One is a refuge in the time of trouble, the salvation of the righteous.  
The Savior helps them and rescues them, because they take refuge there.

### RESPONSIVE GOSPEL PRAYER              Luke 6.27-38

*Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain" continues with his instructions for living and loving in a competitive, contrary world. Here his words are reshaped into shared prayer by Steve Garnaas-Holmes.*

I say to you that listen, Love your enemies,

**God of grace, give us compassion for those who are hard to love.**

Do good to those who hate you, bless those  
who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

**We pray for those who oppose or mistreat us, for they are deeply wounded.**

If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also;

**Give us grace and courage to be nonviolent.**

From anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.

**Give us your spirit of generosity.**

Give to everyone who begs from you;  
and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.

**Give us your spirit of forgiveness.**

Do to others as you would have them do to you.

**Help us see others as extensions of ourselves—and love them.**

But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.

**We desire only to be loving, not to be right, to be secure, to be victorious.**

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

**Give us your spirit of mercy.**

Do not judge, and you will not be judged;

do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.  
Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you.  
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.

**May we love as you have loved us.**

**We pray in the name and the spirit and the company of Christ. Amen.**

SCRIPTURE READING Genesis 45.3-11, 15 (read by Pastor Jan)

*That entertaining clip from Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat actually picks up a thread from the middle of the story. Joseph knows his brothers, but they don't know him. He sends them home with food, but keeps one back until they return with the youngest brother, Benjamin. Finally, in this touching scene, they do return and all is revealed.*

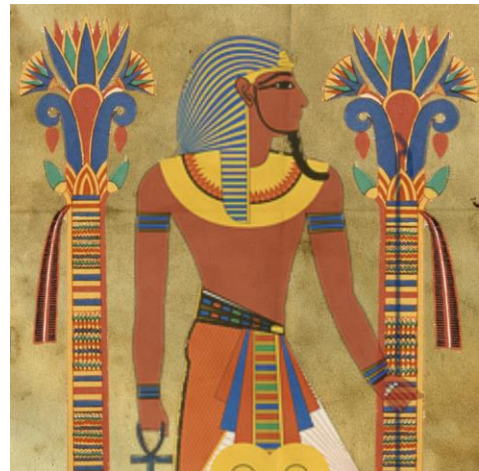
Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him. Holy Wisdom, Holy Word. **Amen.**



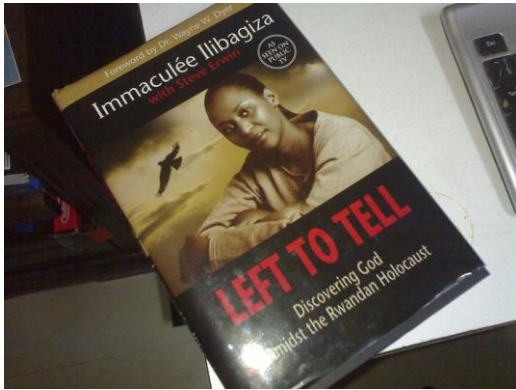
For the past two weeks, if you've paid attention to the news at all, you've heard about people going for the gold in Beijing. In my opinion, whether or not an athlete goes home with a gold medal, every one of them has superpowers. How can human bodies even do those things? At the same time, we've seen powers menacing each other in eastern Europe. Superpowers? Well, super threats, anyway. Nothing about that situation feels golden. But I have good news for you today. You have a superpower, and it is golden! AKA, "the Golden Rule." AKA, "Love your enemies." Not just *love*, though love is powerful in any form. Your superpower means loving your enemies, specifically. For most of us that feels about as attainable as Olympic gold.

So let's go back to the Joseph story. We know the beginning: how Joseph was an arrogant little know-it-all, how his 10 older brothers argued about whether to kill him outright or just leave him to die, and ended up selling him as a slave to Egypt, where he was falsely accused and imprisoned for years. Through shrewdness and sheer smarts (and lots of divine assistance), he rose to a position of power that enabled him to save his family from starving in a famine that affected the whole world as they knew it. That's the outline of the story. Here's the part we don't always pick up on. In the beginning, Joseph is not especially kind or loving. He's a smooth operator, a clever administrator. He's rewarded by the Pharaoh with a golden necklace and a free hand in running the country. But God is kind to Joseph. Here's the truth: God doesn't measure Joseph by the kindness he's shown but by the kindness he needs. Joseph's success is not a reward from God, but a gift. And God doesn't measure us by how kind we are, either, but by how much kindness we need.

Here's another part of the story we might miss. Joseph weeps. He weeps no less than eight times in the course of this story. This is the fifth time. Why do people weep? I think we weep when our hearts are broken, and when they're broken open. The narrator doesn't tell us that Joseph cries when he's sold as a slave, or when he's thrown into prison. He doesn't weep at all until he meets his brothers again after so many years. Then his heart is broken open and his superpower is unleashed. He finds he can love the ones who wanted to kill him, who sold him for silver. God's mercy breaks through and wakes up his heart. Then he can weep. And forgive. And move on.



Maybe some of you remember the story of Immaculée Ilibagiza. She's a member of the Tutsi tribe from Rwanda. Her family was murdered in the Hutu genocide in 1994. The Tutsis and Hutus had lived together in the same villages; they were neighbors, friends. Until they weren't. She survived because a Hutu Christian pastor hid her and seven other women in a 3' by 4' bathroom for 91 days. Some time after the war was over and she was freed, she visited the local Hutu man who had murdered her family. By then, he was in prison. She forgave that man. She says, "I didn't go to see him with the intention of forgiving him. It just happened." Nor did she spend her three months of imprisonment praying for the killers. No, she says, she passed through all the stages of rage and anger, plotting revenge on the ones who were slaughtering her people. Until something shifted in her. God didn't measure her kindness, but how much kindness she needed. She finally awakened to her own Christian faith on a new level. The Tutsi jailor who let



her see the killer was sympathetic - at first. But when she forgave the Hutu, he got angry. He didn't understand how God had unleashed her superpower in that tiny bathroom.

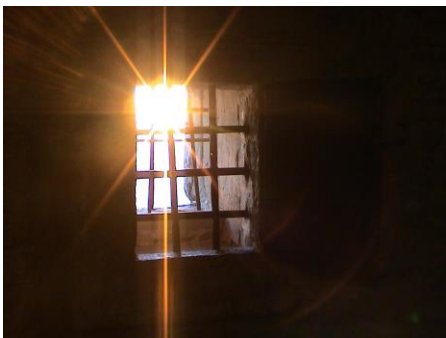
How can the human spirit even do such things? How can we really love our enemies, the ones who trample others on their way to the top, or the ones who hurt us or our loved ones? How can we not hate them? The answer comes up in the psalm. Three times: "Don't fret." "Don't fret because of the wicked. Don't

fret over those who succeed by being bad. Don't fret—it only leads to evil." Now, I consider myself something of an expert on fretting, so I had to investigate. Turns out the original word means "to kindle" or "to burn." And the form used here changes the meaning to something like, "to cause yourself to burn." Have you noticed how so many words for anger are associated with heat? "I was really burned up." "He just boiled over." "She was so mad there was steam



coming out of her ears." The ancient Hebrews understood that fretting is anger we inflict on ourselves. It's like lighting a campfire. You start small, but you keep feeding it and feeding it, blowing on it and blowing on it, and pretty soon you have an all-out blaze. I can do that. I think I'm walking around loving everyone, but say a certain name and the flames leap into life and all of a sudden I'm fuming again. It doesn't feel good. Why do I do it? Because I need mercy.

Fortunately, God doesn't judge us by the kindness that we give but by the kindness that we need. We need to get mercy before we can show mercy. Our past needs to be healed before our superpower can be unleashed. Fretting over injustice done to you, hating because you've been hurt or hated is like clutching the keys to your own jail.



You know, Pharaoh might have given Joseph a golden collar and a lot of power, but Joe was a slave until his heart was broken and he learned how to weep. Immaculée Ilibagiza might have walked out of the bathroom where she was hidden, but she wasn't really free until she found herself forgiving the man who killed her family. God moved in both of them, loving them into freedom. God moves in you, breaking your heart open with kindness. With all the mercy you need.

One more thing must be said: Just because you have this superpower doesn't mean you need to stay in the crosshairs of someone intent on harming you. That's true of victims of domestic

violence, it's true of victims of racist violence whether it comes in the form of police brutality or daily humiliations, and it's true of victims of large-scale, global violence. Loving your enemy does not mean inviting them to hurt you again. It does mean recognizing that they are victims, too. Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you.



Some people say that these are the words that got Jesus crucified. There's probably some truth in that. But we've also heard that the Golden Rule is a universal truth. For some reason, this week I kept getting this message of the superpower of the heart and loving your enemies and the teaching, "Hate never ceases by hatred; only by love is it healed." And the interesting thing is, the message kept coming from non-Christians. From Buddhists and mindfulness teachers. It happened three times. Then it happened again while I was in the process of writing this message. The references are here, if you want to check them out. All this

wisdom from other faith practices - and I will say I honor and respect those traditions, too. And yet, this is also so much a part of our own heritage, both from the Hebrew Scripture and the Jesus story. It's more than what Jesus taught, it's who he was and is. I find it tragic that we Christians have so often used our faith as a weapon and not as a path for healing. But we can change that. God can change that in us. Give us that superpower. Really. I'll leave you with a poem by the Christian pastor who wrote our responsive gospel prayer, Steve Garnaas-Holmes:

God is Love, not payback.

The Merciful One  
does not measure your kindness,  
only your need for kindness.

The more sinful you are,  
the more mercy you lack.  
God completes you.

God is merciful.  
God is mercy itself,  
infinite, never withheld.

Let this be your mantra:  
God is kind to the wicked.  
God is kind to the wicked.  
God is kind to the wicked.

Be a river of mercy  
as your spring is mercy.<sup>1</sup>

Amen. Thanks be to God.

<https://www.gaia.com/share/ckzjgz35k002x0j7i14ys0cpm?rfd=fhLxm3&language%255B%255D=en>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-znoDGSj3Qo&t=232s>

<https://onbeing.org/programs/sharon-salzberg-robert-thurman-love-your-enemies-really/>

<https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/personal-journeys/2022/02/16/journey-from-rage-to-mindfulness?>

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light*, February 16, 2022.

### **Prayers**

God of love, you have loved us perfectly. Fill us and guide us with your Spirit, that we may perfectly love and serve you, and love others—even our enemies—as ourselves. By your grace may we love one another as you have loved us, and be merciful as you are merciful.

When we hear of actions that disturb us and people who behave wickedly in our eyes, help us not to kindle that slow burn of hatred within ourselves, but to stop and pray and seek to understand. Soften our inner nature so our outer behavior may reflect your spirit.

The world's woes are too many to count; we place them and ourselves in your crucible of love for healing, In the silence, hold us tenderly so that we may hold others tenderly.

Still, you have given us specific persons out of all those on earth to care for as gift and as task. They are yours, and you gave them to us to love. May we do so in the strength of your grace. Remember us in your blessed community and teach us to pray: Heart of heavenly love, hallowed be your name; your harmony come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and let us not be led into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For the peace, the potential, and the praise are yours, now and forever. Amen