Sermon on Epiphany 7
(Gen 45; 1 Cor 15; Lk 6:27-)

In Wendell Berry’s gorgeous novel, *Jayber Crow,* Jayber is the barber in Port William, Kentucky; the story is narrated by him and based around his conversations and interactions with the town characters including Troy Chatham, a farmer who is into “expansion,” an expansion that, according to Jayber, ends up destroying a lot of land in the county

To make matters much worse, Troy married Mattie, the woman he has secretly loved from High School days. It is the late 1960’s and the fight in America over civil rights and the Vietnam war is burning on the streets and dividing fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers

Troy is a fierce supporter of the U.S. war policies, one evening in the barbershop, he loosens his lips with regards to the protestors: “They ought to round up every one of them sons of bitches and put them right in front of the damned communists, and then whoever killed who, it would be all to the good.”

There was a little pause after that. Nobody wanted to try to top it. . . .

It was hard to do, but I quit cutting hair and looked at Troy. I said, “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you.”

Troy jerked his head up and widened his eyes at me. “Where did you get that crap?” I said, “Jesus Christ.” And Troy said, “Oh.”

It would have been a great moment in the history of Christianity, except that I did not love Troy.

I can relate; it’s one thing to know the difference following Jesus can make in the abstract, I can even admire the wonder and beauty of our gospel text from a distance, imagining that I could, theoretically, love my enemies or at least everyone else’s enemies.

But then it all comes crashing down: sure I’ve blessed those who’ve cursed me; I’ve prayed for those who’ve stuck emotionally poisonous knives into me; but I’ve nurtured grudges that have turned into fantasies of revenge towards those same people.

Even with counselling, even with contemplative prayer in which I learn to breathe and practice mindfulness, I recognize how woefully short of this ideal I am!

There’s no teaching of Jesus that helps us understand more clearly what Paul says in our second reading, “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.” We simply cannot, however hard we try, completely remove the fight or flight response that is hardwired into our DNA and that kicks in when people hurt us; that kicks in for others when we hurt them!

Now this brings up a bunch of things doesn’t it? Should we be trying to do the impossible? Should we be trying to contradict our human condition in some fundamental way?

I don’t think that’s what Jesus is aiming at in his teaching which I’ll get to in a minute; nor, by the way do I think Paul means that we can’t participate in becoming followers of Jesus in the new commons being created by God and Christ’s Spirit

As is usual for human beings, our own struggles, Jayber Crow’s struggles, my own struggles with this teaching begin because I’ve tried to absolutize them, tried to ram this teaching into some “one size fits all mould.”

But is Jesus asking that I feel no hatred in my heart towards those who hurt me or hurt others? I don’t think so.

Further, in response to those who would absolutize this teaching, is Jesus asking the abused woman, the abused child to simply and continually offer themselves up to more abuse? What about marginalized communities in our midst? This has happened (still happens today!) in the name of “biblical teaching.” I don’t think so; in fact, I’ll be stronger, No, Jesus is not!

Is what Jesus asking of us as persons, but particular as a community difficult, counter-cultural, something that we’ll have to work at our whole lives and not fully arrive? Yes, I think so. But what that is exactly will need to be individually and corporately discerned.

Is this teaching idealistic or is it meant to be practical? It’s both.

So to elaborate briefly on each of these questions and concerns we need to understand Jesus in the context of what he has been saying since this bit of teaching is a continuation of his “Sermon on the Plain,” Luke’s version of Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount.”

Last week (at least at St. Thomas) I shared the story of Herb who became a paraplegic half-way through life and through a very difficult process renewed the meaning of his life.

I shared that in some significant ways, Herb participated in the meaning that Jesus ascribes to loss in the first part of his sermon on the plain, the part that immediately precedes what we read today.

The blessings that Jesus proclaims there for the poor, the hungry and those in sorrow are not invitations to seek poverty, hunger or sorrow but promises that with God’s help, precisely in those things, we might find ourselves, not forsaken, not abandoned, not hopeless but, actually, with the kind of clarity and purpose that brings the joy of God.

I think the difficult sayings that follow and that we read today need to be understood from a similar perspective since it is all part of the same upside-down way of seeing the world.

In other words, when we have the misfortune of being hated, mistreated, robbed or abused it truly is a misfortune, an evil, an experiencing of less than God desires for all relationships but that is not the end of the story.

For just as Herb experienced a heightened sense of purpose after his accident, so it is possible, once we’ve experienced mistreatment to discover the power of love in a way not possible when our relationships are characterized by a quid pro quo, a tacit “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine!”

This is part of Jesus’ explicit point, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.”

But as Jesus knows and we certainly know, this is a lousy foundation on which to build commitment and faithfulness. Because at the first sign of trouble we’re liable to leave each other in the lurch. Something God doesn’t do!

But what if, like Herb, who used his accident to craft a more powerful meaning for his life, we could use the very incidents that would normally drive us apart to help us form a higher view of love and commitment; to build stronger community and understand more fully the joy of faithfulness?

That’s what I think is going on here; so to take the concerns I raised one at a time: This is not about feelings of hatred, feelings of revulsion or disgust which, precisely because they’re feelings we can’t easily control.

So, if someone calls me a jerk I’m not likely to have warm and fuzzy feelings towards them; but what I can do is love them. Love, the Greek word is agape, is an attitude and mode of action, not an emotion.

So to give an example of a loving action to an enemy, when Jayber Crow spoke Jesus’ words to Troy Chatham, calmly, confronting him with a different way of being, he was acting in agape, in a the love of God. He did not love Troy emotionally, was revolted by his destructive farming practices and mistreatment of the woman he secretly loved, but instead of ignoring him, instead of treating him as simply evil and to be shunned, Jayber acted towards him in love giving Troy the opportunity to reflect on a different way to live.

Further, these words which have been weaponized against those in difficult abusive relationships cannot be taken in that way if taken in context; in each case, you’ll note, it’s the person who has been mistreated who exercises agency, who takes a specific action.

There is no passive, “just keep getting hit, just keep taking it without responding in any way.”

Indeed the very actions that Jesus advocates, blessing, loving, offering more than what is requested are themselves ways of showing up the evil that has been done!

And though it is the case that abusers need to answer for their abuse, the very agency offered by the victims means they are not allowing the actions of others to define them; indeed they are acting in the only way that might yet bring about reconciliation.

And it is to this “better foundation,” this better way to build a lasting community that Jesus is really aiming. If we build a community based on affinity, a community based on entertainment, a community based on the emotion of love we’re no different from anyone and therefore no farther ahead in cooperating in Christ’s New Commons.

But what if, when I mistreat you, you don’t immediately throw up your middle finger and tell me to go to hell? What then, what if, despite your emotions you act towards me in love? What have we got? We’ve got a demanding ethic that reflects God’s heart and goes a long way to the kind of relational security we all long for but wonder if it’s truly possible.

Then, like Joseph, we’re willing to use our agency to try and repair, to try and tell the truth, to cauterize relational wounds and take the risky and beautiful actions that Christ takes towards us each week at this table. Amen.