

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA**

February 20, 2022 – EPIPHANY 7C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: *“I Will, With God’s Help”*

Genesis 45:3-11, 15	(Joseph is reunited with and reconciled to his brothers)
Psalms 37:1-12, 41-42	(Do not fret because of evildoers. God will punish them.)
1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50	(St. Paul speaks about the resurrection after death)
St. Luke 6:27-38	(Jesus teaches us: love your enemies and lend freely)

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In January 2020, “HR Magazine” found that “26% of employees and 20% of employers said conflict is prominent in their workplace [and] 35% of employees reported having experienced some form of interpersonal conflict—either an isolated dispute or [an] ongoing difficult relationship.”<sup>1</sup>

In 2019, an organization called “Pollack Peacebuilding Systems” listed the 7 most common issues over which family members argue: 1) money; 2) a family-run business; 3) in-law-related conflict; 4) family events; 5) sibling conflict over the care of an elderly parent; 6) step-parent/step-child conflict; and 7) divorced parents fighting over the care and discipline of a child.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus knew that our relationships with other people are not always good ones, and that forgiving someone who hurts us can be extremely difficult. And so, our Lord frequently addressed the problems we encounter when dealing with other people. Jesus’ teaching in today’s Gospel lesson is an example, when He talks about the importance of forgiving one another and also gives advice on how to deal with those who provoke anger and hatred in our hearts and in our actions.

I freely admit that my first reaction, when someone treats me unfairly, or belittles and demeans me, is to become angry. Since I’m also allergic to conflict, I tend to just want to get away from that person. But Jesus reminds us that putting distance between ourselves and the offender will not solve the problem. Even if the person who is our enemy is far away, he or she can still hold our mind and spirit captive, just as surely as if they had thrown us in a prison cell.

And that is why Jesus talks so much about forgiveness—because forgiveness is the key that unlocks all the dungeons in which we end up when we get stuck in anger and bitterness, hold grudges, or persist in disliking or even hating someone for a wrong they have done to us. Forgiveness can hold the space open for a bad relationship to be redeemed, to possibly change, and maybe grow—with God’s help. But what is forgiveness? It’s not an emotion or a feeling, but an act of will, in which we choose to release the other person from the debt we think they owe us. It could actually involve money, but more often, the “debt” consists of love withheld, love betrayed, or love abused. We can’t make the decision to forgive without God’s help. And sometimes, it requires a lot of prayer—and tears—first.

Not only did Jesus talk about loving and forgiving our family and friends. He also talked about the importance of loving our enemies—those who offend and anger us because of differences in opinions, values, politics, goals, and standards. These days, people become enemies through the click of a mouse or a screen swipe, and anger is everywhere. If you are on Facebook or Twitter, you’re already familiar with angry people ranting and raving about all kinds of stuff. As a result, we’ve come to expect an irate reaction over just about anything.

Last Saturday, I had to go to the Department of Motor Vehicles to get a new driver’s license photo. I probably waited less than 10 minutes—which is a minor miracle at the DMV. When my number was called, the clerk hastily apologized: “Sorry you had to wait,” as if she was bracing for an enraged outburst because I had to take my turn.

Now, anger definitely has a place in this broken world. Not *selfish* anger—that’s about our egos—but the kind of *righteous* anger with which Jesus reacted to words and actions that were not God’s will. The New Living Translation of Ephesians 4:26 tells us “don’t sin by letting anger control you. Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry.” God knows that remaining bound up in our anger and resentment only hurts ourselves.

Jesus addresses this problem when He tells us to love our enemies and to do good to those who hate us. It’s not easy! But we can do it, even though it may take a while, with God’s help.

A modern-day prophet, Martin Luther King, Jr., handled his righteous anger over the injustices that he, his family, and Black people all over America endured because of segregation in this country and the racism which perpetuated that unjust system. Because he was a Christian, King would not let himself stay trapped in his anger. He said: “If you internalize anger and you don’t find a channel [for it], it can destroy you... . Hate is too great a burden to bear.”

In a February, 2019 program on National Public Radio, Nell Greenfieldboyce talked about the time someone threw dynamite at King’s house. He went rushing home and found that an angry crowd had gathered, some with weapons, ready to take revenge on King’s behalf. King stood on his front porch, talked about the redemptive power of love, and sent everyone home. But that night as he lay in bed and thought about how his wife and child could have been killed, he felt his anger rising. Even so, he told himself, he must not become bitter.<sup>3</sup>

King believed in the power of redemptive love and understood that “Anger is part of a process that includes anger, forgiveness, redemption and love, because if you only have anger, you can’t get anything constructive done.” So, King helped people channel their anger by engaging in nonviolent protest based on the teachings of Jesus, to work for change against the injustices done to them. Instead of running the other way in the face of danger, or engaging in violence against their abusers, the protesters did what Jesus talked about in today’s gospel.

“If someone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.” By standing their ground in the face of threats and violence, the civil rights’ protesters held a space open in which redemptive love between them and those who fought against them could potentially take root and grow. Their nonviolent protest ultimately led to The Civil Rights Acts of 1964, which ended segregation and sought to ban employment discrimination.<sup>4</sup>

A great example of how to deal with injustice comes from today’s Old Testament reading. If anyone in the Bible had the right to be angry, it would be Joseph. Because his brothers were jealous over their father Jacob’s love for Joseph, they sold him into slavery, and he ended up in Egypt. After they got rid of him, they went home and told their father Joseph was dead.

Today’s lesson picks up the story many years later. A great famine has come upon the land, and the brothers and their families are starving to death. They’ve heard there is food in Egypt, so they go to ask for help. Joseph, whom they had abandoned and rejected long ago, is now a powerful official in Egypt; he even has control of who is allotted food.

So, here come the brothers that treated him so badly. They are completely at Joseph’s mercy. No one would blame Joseph for being angry after all these years and taking revenge on his brothers by letting them starve to death, or even killing them on the spot. Instead, he loves them in the redemptive way Jesus talks about, as he says to them, “Come closer to me.” This is the same redemptive love God has for us. When we seek God, no matter what mistakes we’ve made, or wrongs we’ve committed against God and our neighbors, God loves us with forgiving, cleansing, and redeeming love. And like Joseph to his brothers who had sinned against him, the Lord says to us: “Come closer to me.”

Joseph further comforts his brothers, saying: “do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me . . . it was not you who sent me here, but God.” Some of you who are present this morning can testify how God was able to turn a bad situation into a good one, because that is something our Lord enjoys doing! In tough times, we need to remember that. And, just as Joseph embraced his brothers and wept over them with love and forgiveness in his heart, God embraces us, and weeps tears of love over us too.

The ending of this powerful story of redemptive love is so wonderfully down-to-earth: “After that, his brothers talked with him.” They hung out again, sharing their stories, laughing, and enjoying one another once more.

God wants us to have that kind of redemptive, loving relationship with our family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, fellow parishioners—and even our enemies. But how do we achieve that? Not under our own power, or out of our own abilities, for sure. Only when God is involved can there be true reconciliation.

So we return to that phrase, “Come closer to me.” God wants us to draw closer to Him. The Amplified Bible version of James 4:8 tells us: “Come close to God [with a contrite heart] and He will come close to you.” The closer we are to God, the farther we will be from our petty-minded angry little selves. We will begin to see things through Christ’s eyes, and will yearn to bring His forgiving, saving love to others. We will begin to, as 1 John 4:19 says, love one another, because God loved us first.

In our Baptismal vows—which we repeat from time-to-time in our liturgies, here—the response to each question is: “I will, with God’s help.” That short phrase encapsulates two key truths about love and forgiveness. Both are acts of the will, and neither is possible without God’s help. Jesus can help each of to begin making better choices, today. After all, it is He who said: “Ask, and you shall receive.” Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Emma Greedy, “Conflict a Common Occurrence at Work,” *HRMagazine*, 22 January 2020 < <https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/content/news/conflict-a-common-occurrence-at-work> > 14 February 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Source: Jeremy Pollack, “Why Do Families Fight? 7 Common Types of Family Conflicts,” [pollackpeacebuilding.com](https://pollackpeacebuilding.com), 19 March 2019, < <https://pollackpeacebuilding.com/blog/common-types-of-family-conflicts/> > 14 February 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Source: Nell Greenfieldboyce, “The Power Of Martin Luther King Jr.’s Anger,” *NPR.org*, 20 February 2019 <<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/02/20/691298594/the-power-of-martin-luther-king-jr-s-anger>> 14 February 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Adapt. Catherine D. Hicks, 24 February 2019, St. Peter’s Episcopal Church, Port Royal VA. Used with permission.