

**Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany, February 24, 2019.**

Over the next several months, we will be hearing from representatives of some of the organizations that we support through our outreach program, coordinated currently by Opie and Elizabeth. I want to use our lessons this morning as an introduction to these visits.

Let's start with the Collect. Each Sunday we are provided two Collect options. One is called traditional, the other contemporary. We use the traditional option on Morning Prayer Sundays and the contemporary version on Communion Sundays. Sometimes it's useful to look at the difference. Today is one of those times.

The traditional version uses the word "charity." The contemporary version uses the word "love." Why, do you suppose, the editors felt that the contemporary version needed to remind us that charity is grounded in love, as if, without the reminder, we might not make the connection? Is it simply because contemporary society is more used to "love" as a word than "charity"? Or, could it be that you and I might engage in charity for reasons other than love, and therefore need a reminder?

I don't know the answer to that question, but exploring it, I think, is useful. And, to help us, we are provided, as always, with four lessons.

As you will recall, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers (**Genesis 45:3-11, 15**). They were jealous of him, for he seemed to be the favorite. When I read this story now, I think of one of the Lexus car commercials. Emily, the young daughter, the only child at the time, considers the passenger van as hers. But then a baby sister arrives, and the mom asks Emily "Isn't it great to have a baby sister?" Well, Emily is not pleased, and her confident, happy, "this space is all mine" smile, turns into a jealous smirk.

Joseph has quite a different attitude when he is reunited with his older brothers. Rather than pay back the brothers for their jealousy and cruelty, Joseph, who has done very well in Egypt, offers to help the brothers survive a famine. "And he

kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.”

The message for you and me is that, when someone is in need, we help. It's that simple. It doesn't matter what the history is. If there is a need, we do what we can to meet that need. That's our responsibility. We don't even have to like the person. We simply should do what we are meant to do, and that is to help. Forget the history, no matter how painful it might be.

Would people understand if Joseph didn't help? Of course. But that's not what God wanted Joseph to do. And that's not what God wants us to do. If someone needs help and we are in a position to offer that help, we do so. If there is justice to be meted out, God will do that. As **Psalms 37** notes, “Refrain from anger, leave rage alone; do not fret yourself; it leads only to evil.”

St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians (**I Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50**) approaches the issue in a different way. He makes a distinction between perishable and imperishable, between a physical body and a spiritual body, between dust and heaven. You and I have a choice. We can exist within the perishable, physical and dust world. Or we can accept God's decision to offer us the imperishable, spiritual and heaven world.

It is this second world that God wants for us, and it is this second world that is ours to accept, with gratitude and willingness to help others. Paul notes, “What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.” In other words, we are not pawns in some cosmic battle. We are creatures meant to trust in God's forgiveness, and to reflect that Divine forgiveness in our relationships with others, even when there is some cost to us.

In Luke's gospel (**Luke 6:27-38**), Jesus is even more direct. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt ..... 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.”

“Okay,” you say, “I get it. But, when I think of charitable giving, I don’t think of enemies; I think simply of people in need and my ability to help them by supporting a responsible organization.” That, of course, is what our outreach program is all about. What’s not to like? What’s not to support? We want to do our part in helping those in need. “It’s not a matter of jealous brothers or enemies. I just want to help those who need help and who will be grateful for that help.”

Aha! We have just introduced a new variable into this discussion. What is the response to our offer from those being helped? Is it thanksgiving, which is what we would expect and prefer, or is it perhaps “It’s about time you helped. And it’s about time you helped some more. You can do more. I know you can. You’ve had it your way for ever. I’ve never had the breaks you have had. It’s my turn now.”

My guess is that we’ve had those feelings. The charities we prefer are those with grateful recipient. If we get even a hint of “It’s about time,” we make that our last gift, without even exploring where that attitude comes from. “If you can’t at least say thank you, I’ll help someone else.”

Many of you are involved in charitable organizations. And you know how critical it is to say “Thank you” to your donors. It’s what you expect as a donor and what you should offer as a recipient. But sometimes there is a depth of hurt and anger and disappointment and exhaustion on the part of the recipient that gets in the way of a simple “Thank you.” It’s in these challenging situations that we are called to exercise what the Collect refers to as “God’s greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and all virtue.”

The relationship of love and thank you is deep. For the recipient, there should be a profound thank you for the love others have shown. And, for the donor, there should be a profound thank you for the opportunity to express love through assisting those in need.

It should also be noted that there might be a reversal of roles at some point. Things happen. Donors can become recipients. And recipients can become donors. We should not assume that the role we are in now will always be our role.

If these roles are seen as given, peace and virtue might give way to what both versions of the Collect refer to as “death.” A far safer recipe for all is “a good measure of love, shaken together and running over.” Another version of this recipe is the Summary of the Law: “Love God and Love Neighbor.”

So, to the organizations we support, we say thank you. We know what we are supposed to do, and you provide an avenue for fulfilling this expectation. You don’t have to do this, but you do, and we are grateful to you for providing an opportunity to help. We want to help, but sometimes we don’t know how. You do know.

And to those in need who will benefit from these organizations, we also say thank you. We don’t always know the stories of those served by these organizations. But we do know this: if we can help, and most of us can, God expects us to do so, and the roles of donor and recipient can be reversed, either over time or in an instant, suggesting that charitable giving is a pretty good investment in our own future.

One of the great traditions of our nation is charitable giving. For those of us who are faith-based, charitable giving is more than a tradition. It is an expected way of saying thank-you for all of our blessings. Amen.