

Sermon for 2-24-19
Scriptures -- Luke 6:27-38; Genesis 45:3-11, 15
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If you pay any attention to the news these days, you are probably aware that **extremism** is on the rise, in our country and around the world. On September 11th, 2001, many of us learned about Islamic extremism; more recently, we've seen a rise in "homegrown" domestic extremists. These are Americans who stockpile weapons, draft paranoid manifestos, and seek to kill certain politicians, public figures, and even large numbers of our friends and fellow citizens.

Ideological extremism that stops short of advocating physical violence is also increasing... any of us who've recently attempted to engage in an honest conversation about a political issue with relatives, colleagues, and neighbors who see things differently can probably attest to this. We are becoming more and more polarized, more and more partisan. We can't even agree on the language we use, or the appropriate boundaries for our debates.

We can't talk to each other about "hot-button issues" -- you know the ones I'm talking about! -- because so many of us have become incapable of disagreeing without seeking to destroy. Instead of recognizing another's humanity, we highlight inhumanity; instead of finding common ground and shared values, we retreat to our partisan battle lines and we stay there.

More and more, it seems, we are becoming a nation of extremists.

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You know what? I think all Christians should be extremists.

That's right -- All Christians should be extremists!

Now before you jump to any conclusions here, let's look at today's Gospel reading. These verses are from the middle of the Sermon on the Plain, which is just Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is

preaching to a large crowd made up of his disciples and other followers, along with travelers who've come from the surrounding towns to hear his teachings and be healed of their infirmities. Men and women, old and young, Jews and Gentiles, neighbors and strangers -- they're all here. Jesus begins with the Beatitudes ("Blessed are the poor; Blessed are the hungry")ⁱ. We heard those last week. Now he moves into these pithy life lessons -- instructions on how to be a good person -- generosity, and compassion, and forgiveness, and mercy. You know, Mr. Rogers stuff.

But let's be real here: this is **extreme** Mr. Rogers stuff. This is extreme forgiveness, extreme generosity, extreme love of neighbor. This stuff doesn't make any sense. It's ridiculous, it's foolish, it's bleeding-heart nonsense. Do good to those who hate you?ⁱⁱ Give to everyone who begs from you?ⁱⁱⁱ Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return?^{iv}

You won't be very successful like that. You won't get anywhere in life. You won't get rich, you won't gain power, you won't become famous. These teachings don't make a bit of sense to us today.

They didn't make any sense to the crowds two thousand years ago, either. But Jesus still said them. And his reason, his rationale, the foundation for what he said and the promise he offered rang true back then just as it rings true today: **this is not about us; it's about God.**

These teachings are not about what I as an individual can get out of life, or where I can go, or what I can achieve. These teachings are about the astonishing miracles God can accomplish through each of us when we choose extreme love and mercy.

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Look at the story of Joseph. Here is a man who has been betrayed by his brothers, his own flesh and blood, sold into a life of slavery, treated with unimaginable cruelty by those who should have loved and protected him. And what does Joseph do, when reunited with the brothers who betrayed him?

Joseph forgives. He doesn't pretend it never happened, he doesn't try to get revenge. He embraces his brothers, he kisses them, he offers them the kindness and generosity and dignity they refused him.

And most importantly, Joseph can see God's hand in all of it. God didn't throw Joseph into that pit, God didn't sell Joseph to the slave-traders... but because Joseph is able to forgive, God is working through this pain and tragedy to preserve life^v: "God sent me before you to preserve.. a remnant on earth;... God has made me Lord of all Egypt;... I will provide for you there."^{vi}

Joseph sees it, plain as day -- God has done a marvelous thing, a holy gift, a miracle that can only come to fruition through forgiveness and reconciliation. God has transformed pain and violence and separation and made a way for righteousness and new life. This gift of God's holy fulfillment is **far** greater than any benefit Joseph might get from "eye for an eye" style vengeance on his brothers. This gift is not momentary or fleeting; it does not leave a bitter taste in one's mouth. This gift is the blessing of **living out the reign of God.**

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Joseph isn't the only one who shows us the miraculous power of extreme forgiveness and mercy. How about a more modern example? This one's from a 2011 episode of NPR's StoryCorps.

In 1993, Oshea Israel, who was 16, got into an argument with 20-year-old Laramiun Byrd at a party in Minneapolis. Things escalated quickly. Oshea pulled out a gun and shot Laramiun, who died at the scene. He was the only child of a teacher's aide named Mary Johnson.

Ten years later, Mary Johnson decided that she needed to meet the man who killed her son. "We needed to get to know one another," she said.^{vii} "And that's... what we did."

Oshea describes that first meeting like this: "I took [your son's] life—without even knowing him. But when I met you, he became human to me. When it was time to go, you broke down and started shedding tears. And then you

just started going down, and the initial thing I tried to do was just hold you up in my arms. I'm thinking, *I can't let her hit the ground*. So I hugged you like I would my own mother."

Here's Mary, again: "After you left [the room], I said, 'I just hugged the man who murdered my son.' And that's when I began to feel this movement in my feet. It moved up my legs and it just moved up my body. When I felt it leave me, I instantly knew that all that anger and hatred and animosity I had in my heart for you for twelve years was over. I had totally forgiven you."

They met regularly after that. When Oshea was released after 17 years in prison, Mary asked her landlord to rent the vacant apartment next door to hers to Oshea. She helped him transition back into society. In every new challenge Oshea faced, Mary was right there beside him.

Now Oshea works at a recycling plant during the day, and takes college courses at night, with Mary's encouragement. They spread their message of hope and forgiveness and reconciliation in Minneapolis and beyond through a nonprofit called From Death To Life.^{viii}

Mary calls Oshea her "spiritual son." He just calls her mom.

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Mary Johnson and Oshea Israel are extremists; the very best kind of extremists. Extremists for mercy, and reconciliation, and love.

Just like Joseph demonstrates in the book of Genesis, and just like Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Plain, and just like Mary and Oshea's example shows us, God can and will work miracles when we lay down our walls and our wounds and our weapons and **forgive**.

When we are willing to look past our pain and our anger and see worth and humanity in those we consider our enemies; when we live out that foolish and fearless love that makes absolutely no sense in this world of power and domination and revenge; when we practice **extreme** forgiveness, **extreme** love, **extreme** mercy...

Well, then, as Jesus says, then our "reward will be great" and we "will be children of the Most High" God^{ix}. May it be so. **Amen.**

ⁱ Luke 6:20-21 *NRSV*

ⁱⁱ vs. 27

ⁱⁱⁱ vs. 30

^{iv} vs. 35

^v Genesis 45:5

^{vi} vs. 7, 9, 11

^{vii} <https://www.thedailybeast.com/you-killed-my-sonand-i-forgive-you>

^{viii} <http://www.bewhoyouare.info/fromdeathtolife/home.html>

^{ix} Luke 6:35