The Rev. James Richardson
Epiphany 7
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*O LORD, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is nothing: Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love.* Amen.

My friends who don’t go to church – and used to be a newspaper reporter – I have a lot of those kinds of friends, often ask me this question:

Is your church liberal or conservative? They ask because they are trying to figure out where I fit – and where this church fits – on their mental roadmap of how the world functions.

I usually answer with something like this: We are liberal on this and conservative on that. But I must admit, I give a wholly inadequate answer to what is really a wholly inadequate question.

And then today, as if to completely underline the inadequacy of the question and the inadequacy of my answer, we hear Jesus say this:

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

And if that is not enough, Jesus adds this:

“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.”

And...

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

Oh my.

This teaching definitely does not fit on the roadmaps of how the world functions.

This teaching, in fact, is the big boulder in the middle of the church’s living room, and it’s been sitting there for the past 2,000 years.

Objectively looking over that span of time, it would not seem that the Church, or much of any organized religion, has taken that lesson much to heart.

“Love your enemies…turn the other cheek… give to everyone who begs.” Jesus’s words just do not fit human roadmaps.

And that is precisely the point.

Human behavior – human politics – is often predicated on the principle: Do unto others before they do it unto you.

Human roadmaps are marked with power and violence.
Truthfully, the stories in the Bible are filled with tales of power and violence in the name of God. Moses presides over the drowning of Pharaoh’s army; Joshua conquers Jericho and spares only the family who hides his spies.

Abraham is more than willing to murder his own son to appease God and is held back at the last second. The prophets warn kings that they deserve the calamity about to befall them.

Then, amid all of this mayhem, we get something very, very different: This bright shining moment when Jesus implores us to pray for our enemies, to not strike back, to turn the other cheek, to be merciful, and to give freely to those in need.

Yet, Jesus himself is not always turning the other cheek. Furious at how the money changers are ripping off people, he flips over their tables, confronts the religious authorities, and tells sharp-tongued stories about their impending doom.

So, what do we make of this?

First, Jesus does not advocate being passive in the face of evil. Turning the other cheek does not mean giving in to evil.

A few modern prophets, especially Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., hear in Jesus’s words how loving your enemies can convert your enemies, though sometimes at great cost.

But even Gandhi and King saw how that is not always possible.

In life, we know that the hardest decisions usually aren’t between choosing between good or evil. The hardest decisions come when choosing between the best of bad choices.

There are times when evil must be confronted, and the moral course comes at a terrible cost.

Later today, we will be honoring the life of Bob Gaines, who was truly a giant in this Cathedral – and beyond.

Bob was a true American hero. He flew 35 missions as a tail gunner in a B17 bomber in Europe in World War II. You may not know this: The life expectancy of a B17 tail gunner was four missions – two weeks.¹

Bob and his crewmates put their life on the line to do what had to be done to confront and dismantle Nazism, probably the worst evil to ever walk this earth.

Yet I never heard Bob glorify war; he made a moral choice to do his duty after political leaders failed in their duty to confront Hitler and his evil.

All of us make the choices we have to make as best we can. But, thankfully, most of our choices don’t involve great world events.

Most of our choices come in the everyday moments with loved ones, friends and strangers. What roadmap do we follow in those moments?

God’s vision – God’s dream – the inner roadmap Jesus describes – is a world without violence, abuse and hatred.
How do we end violence, abuse, and hatred?
By ending it.
We cannot end any of this until we change the roadmaps within ourselves.
Jesus’s roadmap points us to a roadmap based on love, mercy and healing.
How to build a more loving, merciful, forgiving, and generous world? By becoming more loving, merciful, forgiving and generous, starting with the roadmap we follow within ourselves.

“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”
And then choose to do as Jesus would have us do: Confront the human structures that thrive on violence, retribution, exploitation, abuse and hatred.
Build the structures that thrive on love, mercy, and healing.
There is a word in Hebrew that I think unlocks where Jesus ultimately takes us in this teaching today. The Hebrew word is tzedek, which is often translated in English Bibles as “righteousness.”
The better meaning of tzedek is “justice,” and it means justice for the poor, the sick, the lonely, the victimized and the oppressed.
To do justice – tzedek – is the task we are given as followers of Jesus.
We won’t be perfect. We won’t always succeed, and we won’t always get it right. We will be faced with hard choices.
When we fall short, as surely we will, Jesus calls us to pick ourselves up, forgive each other, and forgive ourselves.
A good place to begin is here, today, with the healing prayers we shall shortly share. These prayers are powerful, and they are prayers not only for our bodies but for deepest core of our being.
Our prayers of healing can do more than we can imagine. These prayers will even change our inner roadmaps – if we let them. AMEN.

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1 https://www.quora.com/What-was-the-life-expectancy-of-a-B-17-crewman-flying-over-Europe-in-WWII