



What Goes Around, Comes Around



A Sermon By
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February 24, 2019
The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2019-02-24-AWW.mp3>.

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As some of you know, I have an older brother, who was born about four years before I was. Because of our age difference, we didn't do a lot together growing up. He ran in his circles, and I ran in mine. One thing we did do together, though, was play basketball, one-on-one, just me against him. We had this old hoop hung above our garage, and the two of us would spend hours and hours out there playing. You might think my older brother took it easy on me during our games together, maybe let me score a basket against him or make a good play, just as a way of encouraging me and supporting me.

But, in case you didn't know, brothers can be competitive, and that was particularly true of my brother and I. There was no way my brother was going to let me do anything. There were no easy baskets, no making any plays. Our games were serious and intense. My brother wanted to beat me into the ground and keep me in my place. His whole approach was: he was the big brother; I was the little brother; and, he was going to win. That's all there was to it. Period. End of story.

This meant our games tended to follow a similar pattern. Since he was bigger and stronger than I was, he used that to his advantage. On offense, he would back in close to the basket to score an easy bucket. On defense, he would push me away from the hoop, making me shoot from outside, and if I managed to slip by him somehow, he would knock me to the ground. "Foul," I would call out.

"Oh, please," he'd respond.

All of this made it hard for me to score any points, and so the games would be 10-nothing, 15-nothing, 20-nothing. I just wanted to keep up with my big brother and show him I could play. I wanted him to know that I was good. Most of all, I just wanted to beat him! For as long as I can remember, all I wanted to do was beat my big brother! But, every single game I got creamed. I couldn't score. I couldn't get a foul. I couldn't do anything. Fueled by my competitiveness and desire to win, my anger and frustration would grow and grow, until at some point in the game, I couldn't take it anymore. I would pick up the ball and throw it at him as hard as I could. "I quit!" I'd say.

And, with that, I would run into the house.

I knew my brother would be angry and coming after me. I usually made it to about the living room, before he'd tackle me, roll me over, put his knee on my chest, and yell: "Don't ever do that again!"

You can imagine why my mother never wanted us to play together.

Now, fast forward to my senior year in high school. My brother was home from college and asked me I wanted to play. I said yes, so we headed out back and started the game... when I realized things had changed. By this time, I was bigger and stronger. I was playing on my high school team and in pretty good shape. My brother, meanwhile, was older, and a little slower, and he hadn't been playing very much basketball. So, suddenly, it was like was like LeBron James. I was making shots from the outside and driving to the hoop at will. I was using my body to keep him away from the basket, and when he tried to take a shot, I'd jump up to block it. You might think I was nice about it, maybe let my brother do a little something to make him feel good, but honestly, I was pretty cocky and condescending about it.

Needing only one more basket to win, I dribbled down the right side and went up for a shot: "Game!" I called out, while the ball was still in the air, and I turned and walked inside, as the ball swished through the net.

Knowing this would make him mad, I ran into the living room. He came charging in after me, his face red with anger. He thought he was going to pummel me, just like the in old days, only this time, I was ready for him. Before my brother knew what hit him, he was on the ground. I had my knee on his chest, and all those years of losing, all of the anger and frustration and humiliation, all those emotions that built up over the years came pouring out, as I just hit him as hard as I could, over and over and over again.

“Yeah,” I thought. “What goes around comes around.”

But, Jesus said, "I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. [And] if anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other [one] also."

You have probably heard those words before. Even people who don't come to church, or don't identify as Christian are familiar with them. They come from a sermon Jesus gave, and in a way, encapsulate the very heart of his message. Jesus often spoke about the kingdom of God, and that kingdom was what life would be like if human relationships were based upon mutual care, compassion, and understanding. Rather than always looking out for ourselves and what was best for us, Jesus wanted us to walk in another person's shoes, listen to a different point of view, see things from someone else's perspective. It was about letting go of our own ego, and interests, and beliefs, and seeing life in a new way. It was about putting away our stubbornness, and hard-headedness, and always needing to be right. The kingdom of God was about treating others as we ourselves want to be treated.

We all know that, of course. We all know how Jesus wants us to act and behave. But, we still struggle to do it. Following the way of Jesus is hard. Who can love their enemies? Do good to those who hate them? Bless those who curse them? Pray for those who abuse them? Who here is good at turning the other cheek?

It can be particularly challenging to do what Jesus says when it comes to our own family. Many of us can be understanding and patient, compassionate and forgiving when it comes to other people, but when it comes to members of our own family, all that generosity goes right out the window. Not that we want to be that way. All of us probably want to have good relationships with our family. But, family is complicated.

Everyone one of us here probably has one family relationship that's similar to me and my brother. It could be with a parent, a sibling, a cousin, maybe it's with your own child. Someone said something or did something to hurt the other person, and they still haven't gotten over it. Whatever it was, whatever was said, it could've happened a long time ago, but that still doesn't matter, because someone is holding on to it, the anger, the pain. They won't let it go. And, even if you're not one of the two people involved, you know how difficult and challenging the situation is: all of the drama, and negativity, and emotion – it infects the whole family.

Almost every family has some troublesome dynamic like this, and so it's not surprising to find family issues and squabbles throughout the Bible. There's Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, even Jesus and his family. But, maybe there's no better example of complicated family than Joseph and his brothers.

Joseph is one of the main characters in the Old Testament. Joseph was born when his father, Jacob, was an old man, one of those surprises God sometimes bestows on parents later in life, and Joseph was the youngest boy in the family, all of which meant he was pretty much spoiled. While his brothers had to make do with hand-me-down clothes, Joseph was given a flashy new robe with long sleeves; and while his brothers were out working the fields in the hot, scorching heat, Joseph stayed at home, doing the easiest of tasks. Plus, Joseph was self-centered and immature. He thought the whole world revolved around him.

All of this made Joseph's brothers very angry and jealous. They were so mad at Joseph that they wanted to kill him, but then, one day, when no one else was around, the brother sold Joseph into slavery.

Before he knew what had happened, Joseph found himself in Egypt, hundreds of miles from home with no one around to help. It could have been the end of Joseph, but he was a lot smarter, stronger, and more resilient than

people thought. And, over the years, Joseph made his own way, climbing up the ladder of success, until eventually, he became the COO for the Pharaoh.

One day, Joseph was holding court, when out of the blue, his brothers showed up. There had been a famine back home, and his brothers were hoping to make a new start of it in Egypt. They didn't recognize Joseph. They were simply pleading their case and asking for help, begging for help.

Joseph could have done anything he wanted. Because his position held immense power and influence, Joseph could have turned his brothers away, or thrown them into slavery, or even had them killed. After all his brothers had done to him, this was Joseph's chance to get back at them and put them in their place. His brothers were at his mercy. This was his moment. This was his big opportunity. What goes around comes around.

But, instead of doing any of that, Joseph forgave his brothers, offering them compassion, love, and a new home.

When it comes to complicated family dynamics, or really, any painful, hurt-filled relationship, someone always has to make the first move. It's to be healing and wholeness, someone has to take the first step, like Joseph did, to offer understanding, compassion, and forgiveness. And, my guess is: Jesus would want us to be that person. Jesus would want us to be the ones reaching out, extending our hand, offering love, offering healing, offering a new start.

What goes around comes around.

Amen.