

## Transformers or Transmitters?

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Genesis 45:3-11, 15 and Luke 6:27-38

Four trees and an empty field. That is all that remains of the West Nickel Mines Amish School. It's been that way pretty much since October of 2006. That was when the world was appalled by one of the most horrific mass shootings in a school full of children... at least, up to that time. The parents of the perpetrator, who took his own life, thought for certain that the fury of the victims' parents would be directed at them.

They were wrong.

Mere hours after the tragedy occurred, an Amish man showed up at their door with a very different kind of message. Instead of condemnation, he delivered a word of forgiveness. The Amish community, he said, saw them as parents also grieving the loss of a child. On the day of the perpetrator's funeral, dozens of Amish men and women, some of them parents of the victims, came to the cemetery and formed a human wall to block the media, allowing the family to grieve privately and with dignity.

And that was not all.

When the perpetrator's mother underwent treatment for Stage 4 breast cancer, one of the girls who survived the massacre cleaned her house for her, before she came home from the hospital. At Christmas, a busload of Amish children arrived at the house to sing her Christmas carols.

The world's shock at the atrocity itself, transformed to amazement at the response of the Amish community. Some people were inspired by the magnitude of forgiveness displayed. Many others were critical. Offering healing without fully grieving their own losses was unnatural, they said.

Precisely.

Of all the things that Jesus ever taught, none has ever been abandoned to the scrap heap of impractical, idealistic and unattainable notions as these words: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

If loving your enemies is the most difficult of all Jesus' teachings, it is also one of the most misunderstood.

The first obstacle to understanding what Jesus meant is that word "love." We think of love as an emotional feeling of deep affection for someone. The Greek language with which Luke wrote

his gospel has several words that are translated as “love” but which all reflect distinctly different forms of love. The word Jesus used is “agape.”

Agape love is not a feeling. It is an intent. Agape can be defined as a whole hearted, unreserved, desire for the well-being of another person without any expectation of anything in return. Even though you may not like them.

Jesus was clearly talking about a kind of love that does not rely on the feeling being mutual when he said, “If you love those who love you; if you do good to those who do good to you; if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive: what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same.”

This command might cause us less trouble if instead of translating the word agape into our English word “love” we just learned the meaning of agape and stuck with that word. If we left it at, “Agape your enemies, do good to them expecting nothing in return” Jesus’ intent would be clearer.

The second barrier to understanding what Jesus says about agape-ing enemies is that we mistake that for excusing or condoning their actions. Jesus *forgave* people but he *never turned a blind eye* to their sins. In the very next chapter of Luke’s Gospel, a woman of bad reputation weeps at his feet. Jesus doesn’t tell her, “it’s OK. You didn’t do anything wrong.” He says that her sins, *which are many*, have been forgiven.

Showing Agape to enemies isn’t the same thing as pretending that they haven’t caused pain and suffering. It isn’t making excuses for their behavior or denying the difference between right and wrong. As Jesus points out, God is kind even to the ungrateful and the wicked. Agape love is the closest thing to Godly love. The only motive Jesus assigns to agape love is that as his followers, we are to be merciful, just as God is merciful. Not only be merciful just as God is merciful to sinners like your enemy. But be merciful just as God has been merciful to *you*.

The third thing that gets in the way of our rightly understanding what showing agape love to enemies really means is how we assume that loving the unlovable is something we do primarily for them and their benefit; when really, it’s not for them that we do it, but for ourselves. Agape is really as much for the benefit of the one giving it, as it is for the one to whom it is offered.

When we lack control over the bad things that others do, agape reminds us of the one thing we can control, which is ourselves and our response to what they have done.

It is one thing to seek justice for wrongs that are done. It is something else entirely to nurse a craving for retribution or revenge that is ultimately destructive to our own souls. Revenge, as they say, is like brewing a cup of poison for someone else but then drinking it ourselves.

Jesus gives two examples of situations where a person is defenseless in the face of a wrong done, but not defined by it. Jesus said, “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other one also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.”

Which sounds like a page out of “How to be a Doormat for Dummies.”

There’s more to these scenarios than meets the eye, though. They were both ways of publicly exposing the harm done to you by another without your retaliating by doing violence yourself and becoming like them.

Agape does not necessarily mean reconciling with the other person, either. Nobody who has been abused and violated is obligated by Jesus’ words to go on surrendering themselves to the same abuse, although many people have been wrongly counseled to do just that based on Jesus’ words.

But a person can suffer from a relentless inner woundedness even when the perpetrator of the wound is no longer in her or his life. The only way out of that kind of bondage is to turn that person over to letting God deal with them so that you can be free from their control over your life.

The Franciscan mystic Richard Rohr has said that, *“If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it.”* The Jesus Way of transforming our pain is agape, which releases the grip that the pain has on us. When that pain is not transformed it gets transmitted; sometimes in the ways we treat others. Sometimes it is transmitted from generation to generation. Almost all the time untransformed pain eats us up from within.

The Old Testament story of Joseph is a case study in pain transformed and not transmitted. A story of agape. You may remember Joseph from the Bible story of the “coat of many colors” he proudly wore as a gift from his father Jacob. When Joseph was a teenager, his older brothers sold him to slave traders. They took his magnificent coat, dipped it in animal blood and presented it to their father as evidence that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.

Joseph was sold as a slave to an influential family in Egypt. Then he was accused of something that he didn’t do and was thrown into prison. While in prison, he developed a reputation for accurately interpreting people’s dreams. Word got to Pharaoh, ruler of Egypt, who was himself having some disturbing dreams. Joseph did such a good job of interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams that he was given a position of power in the kingdom. It was clear that, although his own flesh and blood had done him harm, God had blessed him and brought something good out of that evil.

Years later, a famine struck Joseph’s homeland. His father sent Joseph’s brothers on a mission to Egypt to purchase grain there. His brothers didn’t recognize Joseph, but Joseph knew who they were. He was perfectly positioned to take revenge on them for their betrayal.

When he revealed who he was to his brothers, it says they were dismayed. I think that is an understatement. They expected the worst now that Joseph had power over them. But Joseph understood that God did not place him where he was so that he could transmit his power into vengeance; but so that his anger could be transformed into agape. Instead of treating those

who harmed him as they deserved, he rescued them from the famine by giving them land in Egypt where there was plenty of food.

Joseph had suffered a figurative slap in the face by what his brothers did to him. He literally had his coat taken from him. The pain that he could very well have been transmitted by taking vengeance, was instead transformed into mercy. And generations later – generations that might have never come to be if Joseph had not made the choice for agape – this family produced a distant descendant named...Jesus of Nazareth. The Jesus who would transform the world by forgiving his enemies, even as he died on the cross where they executed him.

Many people endure incredible tragedy in life, like Joseph or the Amish families of West Nickel Mines or maybe some of us gathered here. Few if any make it through life completely unscathed by some level of injustices in life.

But we all have a choice of what to do with the pain we carry. The choice between repeating the pattern of what has been done to us, or of breaking the endless cycle through the practice of agape.

The choice between being transmitters or transformers of our pain.

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