



Come closer
February 24th, 2019
All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta
Rev. Dr. Simon Mainwaring

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The Collect

O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing: Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you. Grant this for the sake of your only Son Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.



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The First Reading *Genesis 45:3-11, 15*

Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there--since there are five more years of famine to come--so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.'" And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

The Epistle *1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50*

Someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven. 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.



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Gospel Luke 6:27-38

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. 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. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. 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."

When you start to think about it, aside from giving us more options for shopping, getting around town and going on vacation, the so-called 'sharing economy' has a lot to offer our attempts at life together on this one, crowded planet. Instead of going shopping for furniture in predictably well-ordered stores with overly keen sales assistants, we can do our shopping on *Craigslist* or *OfferUp* and enter a complete stranger's house and look them in the eye when we ask



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them why they are really selling that futon in the den, and then hear the story of how they had never liked that color when their ex-husband had bought it anyway. Similarly, rather than spend a week in a three feet by three feet hotel room in lower Manhattan, we can hook up with our new best friend on *Airbnb* and spend the evenings wondering where our hosts have hidden all the laundry detergent, and learn that we are not the only ones who can be a little bit disorganized at home. The sharing economy lets us in; it gets us close, it allows us to visit with this great human family in less controlled environments than we have become accustomed to.

My favorite is *Lyft*, the ride share company. What I love about *Lyft* is how, just for a few miles, we get to sit on the inside of cars with people, places, I have discovered, where the driver starts to really feel at home when they spend most of their waking hours in them. This past Friday night, coming back into Atlanta, my latest brush with a not-so-randomly selected stranger drove up in a 2015 Nissan Maxima; his name was Corey. Corey is Haitian by ancestry, has a pencil mustache and a slight French lilt to his accent.



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As I got into the passenger seat next to him, I noticed that he was wearing pajamas. 'That's cool', I thought to myself; 'you're either going to murder me or we're going to drive really slowly from here to Midtown'. "*I don't like the day*", he said, a little too grimly for my liking. "*I do*", I replied, wanting to add, 'and I'd really like to see it again tomorrow if you don't mind'.

It turned out we had, as I always seem to have with *Lyft* drivers, a delightful conversation. In fact, I could now write a short book about Corey, including the tale as to why everyone had to learn French in his family, why he left his job with Delta, and why the rest of us should do our very best to be nice to air stewards once the plane has landed. I will never see Corey again, I imagine, but in a way I wish I would. For, in those few minutes we were in one another's space, and it felt like the world had gotten just that little bit smaller.



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There are ways by which I think that is what God intends for us, for you and I, for the Church, or humanity as a whole: that we might make the world a little bit smaller, one action at a time; that we might get closer to one another. Yet life together is more than coexistence, isn't it. As a community of faith, a community committed to life together, we know that we cannot thrive by merely living alongside one another, as if we were casually sharing a ride back home from the airport. Life together requires us to get close enough to one another to know what it is like when sharing life together is easy and life-giving and what it feels like when it is hard.

Of all the stories in the Bible that might teach us about such proximity, the story of Joseph and his not so close to him brothers is beautifully instructive. Just to recap the story a little, it's fair to say that Joseph and his brothers did not always get along. Jacob, their father, had decided, because he loved Joseph's mother more than his other wives, that Joseph would look good in a beautiful new coat, which not surprisingly his brothers did not take kindly to. So one day, they threw him in a pit and left him for dead. The short of



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this long biblical story, as you may recall, is that Joseph then is taken by traders to Egypt, and by divine providence begins to interpret the dreams of those around him, ultimately including the dreams of the Pharaoh. As events unfold, Joseph is eventually placed in charge of Egyptian efforts to prepare for a famine in the land, and it is because of this famine that Joseph's brothers come to receive their portion of grain such that they might not starve. Finally, then, it is here, at the height of Joseph's power that the question is raised as to what Joseph will offer in return to the brothers who had rejected him all those years ago. What will their relationship look like when all of that pain and hurt comes back to the fore?

The question you and I might seek to answer as we look at this story is where it is that we find ourselves within such a scene. How many of us have family lives, for instance, that have known estrangement? What are the unspoken hurts of our histories, or the friendships that have frayed because of failures that were seen to be beyond the bounds of reconciliation and healing? Where have we fallen between



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the cracks of an eye for an eye relational economy that has looked for a recompense that was never coming?

Joseph is a remarkable figure for us if any of these questions ring true. He has an extraordinary position of power, and as we see in the episode previous to our chapter, where he has a silver cup planted in his younger brother Benjamin's sack, that should he wish to exert his power over his brothers to somehow assuage any residual desire to exact recompense for their wrongdoing against him, then he certainly could do so with impunity. But he doesn't. Instead, he offers the invitation that lies at the very heart of what this lesson from antiquity has to teach us the most: he invites his estranged brothers to come closer.

"Come closer to me". At its best, is that not also the story of the Church, of a people who have chosen to make their commitment to follow Jesus, of trying and failing and trying again to come closer to one another, in and through Christ. As I have come to learn more and more about this church community of All Saints', I have been struck time and again by how much this parish has chosen to be a body together



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through sometimes tumultuous times. I think of one of my predecessors, Milton Wood, who served this parish as rector in the 1950's. He continued to stretch the imaginations of the community he served then, one so profoundly different to the one we enjoy today, to see a more spacious vision of human diversity beyond the prejudices of that era. The leadership of Milton Wood's successors is well-known by many of you here, yet perhaps what we cannot know as well is how the people of this parish responded to the words they heard from this pulpit in crafting a life together that chose to draw closer to the people around them, not only in these pews but in the world beyond this place. I have heard beautiful stories of how our refugee ministries had their early beginnings because of the vision and commitment to relationship that parishioners here had. Other church members have recalled for me stories of their children playing cards on Christmas Eve with men who were staying in the night shelter here on this block. We have journeyed across the world, building relationships in Tanzania and Brazil and Jerusalem because of parishioners like you, and just this very last year, we were named as Midtown Assistance Center's church partner of the year because of



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the commitment our church members have to its ministries manifest in volunteer hours and leadership roles and all-round support for the sense of mission we share with them.

As the early followers of Jesus well-knew and we as his followers know today, it can be hard at times to love, and pray for, and bless in the midst of life together. Yet the confidence we might have in the decision to come closer, to move toward those on the other side of strained relationship, whether that be in our life as a nation or in our lives as individuals or as a community of faith, is a decision to trust that God's economy of grace is a real power that does have the capacity to change us on the inside of who we are. For it is our transformed internal lives that create within us the spaciousness for us to become agents of transformation in one another's lives and in the world around us.



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Life together is wonderful and hard; at times it is painful, at others filled with joy, and it is the life to which we as the church are called to pursue, a life that sees in one another the possibility of grace's power to usher forth new life wherever that new life is needed most. "*Come closer to me.*" *And they came closer.*' May we each continue to find the space we need to discover grace in one another's lives and in the lives beyond this place where we are called to love and serve and grow from glory unto glory.