Stated in positive, rather than negative, terms, today’s collect would sound rather like this: O Lord, you’ve taught us that everything we do with love is worthwhile. Pour your love—the bond of peace and of all virtue, with which we are truly alive—into our hearts.

So, love, and the actions flowing from a loving heart, would seem to form the theme for today. Once again the Hebrew Bible comes through for us, right alongside our Lord’s own words in the gospel to elucidate this theme.

We’ll start with the last first: Jesus tells us to love our enemies, our friends, and those from whom we can expect nothing in return. There it is: the whole of the gospel and our faith.

Someone in the Bible study last Sunday quoted St. Augustine’s famous dictum: “Love God and do as you please.” About as radical as you can get, and as far as you can get from 10 commandments, 39 articles of religion, 613 mitzvot, or any other list of righteous do’s and don’t’s. Augustine was merely saying in the fifth century what Jesus said in the first: love all of God’s creatures, all of God’s creation, and you will be prompted to do only what is pleasing in God’s sight.

Well, that’s the sermon, really, so I might just as well end there, but that’s never stopped me before. This time I’ll allow Joseph to supply the illustration.

The creators of our lectionary give us a lot of credit for remembering Joseph’s story before the incident described for us today. I had to look it up to refresh my memory. I knew that Joseph’s brothers had not done right by him—and that he had undergone some other challenges—but not many specifics. I won’t get into many of those details here, either. Just enough to speak of forgiveness as one expression of the love God pours into our hearts.

Joseph’s brothers sold him to a band of merchants: if that doesn’t constitute “not doing right by him,” I don’t know what does. A reminder that sometimes loving a stranger, even an enemy, can seem easier than loving one’s own family members.

In a later transaction (again, people buying and selling people), he’s sold to a high-ranking minister of King Pharoah. Through intelligence and hard work and after being falsely accused of adultery and then exonerated, he rises to the post of second-in-command in Egypt.

That’s part of what we’re supposed to remember about Joseph, setting the scene for today’s reading. I think it’s important to take a moment to reflect on his taking these actions when another very human response would be to disown his family, revile those who have wronged him, and live a cramped and bitter life in the wake of his misfortunes. But he doesn’t. He has, by God’s grace, I would say, made decisions to forgive those who have harmed him. He has chosen to see his own story as the unfolding of God’s plan for him to do good in God’s world.

His former life—enslavement, imprisonment, and humiliation—might be seen as the seed which had to die in order to produce his new life as forgiver and savior of his family, to use Paul’s example. Does a seed in the ground know anything about patience? Well, we think not, but it certainly might prompt us to think of the times we have felt that our own lives were moribund, or at least on hold, until the next good thing emerged, until we again could see the light of day. The story tells us that Joseph’s brothers virtually buried him in a pit before selling him as chattel. His roller-coaster ride of triumphs and failures gives us a flesh-and-blood example of the psalmist’s admonition to “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.”

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. . . . Do to others as you would have them do to you. . . . 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.”

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. + + +