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7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany  
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### **TEXT: Luke 6: 27-38**

I was visiting my neighborhood video store the other day (the Madisons' home), when Gretchen handed me a DVD and said, "I think you'll like this." It was called "42" and the subtitle said: "The Jackie Robinson Story." Since February is Black History Month I thought, "Sure, I'll take a look-see." Wow! What a story! What a story of love (and patience and perseverance) triumphing over hatred and bigotry and evil!

Then, Brenda here (refer to her) said to me the other night when we were with her and Bethany for dinner, said, "Have you ever read this book?" It's called "7 Men And The Secret Of Their Greatness." I hadn't read the book, although I had read its counterpart, "7 Women And The Secret Of Their Greatness" a few years ago and, in fact, used it as the basis for my messages for our mid-week Lenten services. I love the way the author, Eric Metaxes, writes. In fact, Don Grandstaff gave me another of Metaxes' books, this one simply called "Luther" and I devoured it. Usually a book this thick is a bit intimidating for me but I read it in record time.

As I scanned through the table of contents of this "7 Men..." book, I was surprised to see Jackie Robinson listed among the others: George Washington, Eric Liddell, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Paul II. "Really," I thought, "Jackie Robinson?" I didn't even know he was a Christian and I knew scant little about him as a baseball player. But having just watched the movie "42" and now seeing Jackie Robinson listed as one of Metaxes' great men, I thought I owed this guy a deeper look. And so I read the chapter about him. And just like I expressed after seeing the movie, I said, "Wow! What a man!"

As I read the Gospel assigned for today, a continuation of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain we discussed last Sunday, I thought of Jackie Robinson again. Listen again to these words of Jesus: "*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*" (Lk. 6:27-28) I'm going to stop here, even though the rest of the text truly applies

to Jackie Robinson's story because I want you to see and hear for yourself why I thought of Robinson when I read this text and why Metaxes chose him as one of his seven great men.

I'm going to show you a clip from the Madisons' video. I need to warn you, however: this isn't easy to hear. It'll offend you—and it should. I'm taking a risk showing this during a worship service but I think it's a worthwhile risk if we're to understand how difficult Jesus' words about loving our enemies can be. Let me give you a little background. The year is 1964. Robinson has been recruited to play baseball for the Brooklyn Dodgers and he's the first black man to play in a major league. Robinson is a Christian—a Methodist—and he's been warned that it's going to be tough breaking into this all-white-men's game. The Dodgers are playing Philadelphia (ironically known as the City of Brotherly Love) and Philadelphia's manager is out-for-blood. Listen, please. The language is harsh but we need to understand just how difficult Jesus' words are.

Show the video clip.

Would you read with me please the entirety of today's Gospel lesson?

[Jesus said:] <sup>27</sup>“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup>bleed those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. <sup>31</sup>Do to others as you would have them do to you.

<sup>32</sup>“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup>If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

<sup>37</sup>“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; <sup>38</sup>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.”

How easy it would be to hate. How natural it would be to retaliate. And yet Jesus said we are to be better than that. As Christians, we are to rise above our animal nature and love. Love. Verse 36 tells us: “*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*”

Twenty-five hundred years before Jesus spoke these words, another man practiced them. His name was Joseph. He had been badly treated by his brothers. Yes, he may have provoked them but what they did to him was WAY beyond “an eye for an eye.” ( ) You remember the story, surely. The brothers, fed up with their father’s favoritism toward Joseph as well as Joseph’s arrogant attitude, threw him down into a dry well, determined to do something about this cocky so-and-so. Some traders happened by and the brothers sold, actually sold their brother into slavery—and then lied to their father about what had happened. Joseph was taken down into Egypt where, by God’s grace, he landed a position in the Pharaoh’s service. Proving himself capable and useful, despite egregious setbacks, Joseph rises to second in command in Egypt. Years later, as a result of famine in their land, Joseph’s brothers make the journey to Egypt, seeking food. While Joseph recognizes his brothers, they do not recognize him. In time, Joseph reveals himself to them—and the brothers are terrified, expecting retaliation for what they had done to him earlier. But instead of exercising vengeance upon them—and Joseph had the power to do it—he practices mercy. He forgives them. He helps them. He reconciles with them. Exactly what Jesus said, so many years later, God’s people are to do.

How could Joseph forgive His brothers? How could Jackie forgive that hateful manager and so many others who mistreated him? How would Jesus, hanging from the cross in pain, say, “*Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they’re doing.*” ( )

Not in their own strength could any of these men do what they did. No way. Only by the grace of God could each of these men look upon their persecutors and say, “I forgive you.” It is because each of these men had themselves received mercy that they were able to extend it to others. The first epistle of John ( ) says, “*We love because He first loved us.*” And oh, when we realize that we are forgiven sinners because we have a merciful God, what relief, what joy, what gratitude is ours! “*We love because He first loved us.*” Otherwise, we couldn’t do it. It’s not within our animal nature to forgive, to love, to extend mercy.

Do you understand the difference between grace and mercy? Grace is getting what you don’t deserve; mercy is not getting what you do deserve. (Project this on screen.) Joseph’s brothers received mercy at the hands of Joseph—not getting punished for what they did. They

also received grace at Joseph's hand—restoration of relationship, food and protection during the famine. Mercy and grace. Jackie Robinson received grace when he was chosen by the Dodgers' manager (who was also a Methodist Christian, not so incidentally) as the first black major league player. There was no precedent for this. It was pure grace. Jackie also received mercy