

Sermon on Matthew 18:21-35, Genesis 50:15-21
15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 13, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends, grace and peace to you in the name of our risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

Once upon a time, a long time ago when I was a little boy, I threw a rock at another little boy. It was in the backyard of our south Minneapolis home, when a lot of kids were gathered for my sister's Girl Scout troop meeting, when families were invited. I picked up a small stone, and just threw it. I hit this other kid, and he started to cry. Everything stopped. My father saw it all happen, and told me to say I was sorry. I apologized to the boy, and the activities started up again. I don't know why I did it, as I didn't even know who it was that I hit. I just saw a little stone, picked it up, and threw it. I don't even remember if he forgave me. It didn't matter, because the community activity resumed and everyone forgot about it. Life went on. It's strange, though, that I still remember this thing that happened 60 years ago. Maybe because it's the first time I remember saying I was sorry?

The Christian faith has a lot to say about repentance and forgiveness. Much of the Bible - both in the Old Testament and the New Testament - speak about our need to repent - to turn from our sins against God and our neighbor - and about the need for us to forgive one another, just as God has forgiven us. The Old Testament prophets continuously called on God's people to repent for having turned away from God - to "turn around" and follow God once again - lest they all perish. The threat of punishment for sins, including "burning in hell" is a common motivation used by some of the prophets and from Christian preachers today, to get the faithful to turn from our wicked ways and walk in God's way. "Turn from your sins and live," the prophet Ezekiel said last week. Fear of retribution or punishment is one motivation to change, but the better way to restore community is repentance and FORGIVENESS. As we learned from last Sunday's gospel, reconciliation with our neighbor, and restoration of the community of faith is the true goal - for it is our taste of God's salvation here on earth! This is the point of our lessons today.

In the First Lesson we hear the culmination of the story of Joseph and his brothers, from Genesis, chapter 50. It's a familiar story, winnowed down to seven verses today! So a little background is in order! Many people know this from the popular musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, written by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, starring Donny Osmond! Joseph's brothers had done a terrible thing many years earlier, when Joseph was a boy, favored by his father, Jacob, as his youngest son. Joseph's 11 brothers were so jealous that

they wanted to kill him, but instead sold him into slavery, and told Jacob that Joseph was dead. The slave traders brought Joseph to Egypt, and sold him to an Egyptian officer's household as a slave - ancient world human trafficking. Long story short, after many chapters in the story, Joseph became a favored advisor in the Pharaoh's court, saving Egypt from a great famine. So at the end of the story, Joseph meets his brothers again, who have come to Egypt for food, in the midst of the famine. Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, reconciled with them, and saved them from starvation. But after their father Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers are deathly afraid that Joseph will get his revenge on them, and sell them into slavery or even kill them. They knew they deserved it. They wept and fell down at Joseph's feet, begging forgiveness, as their father had instructed them. Joseph surprised them all, by saying *"Do not be afraid! Even though you intended to do me harm, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones."* In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

It's an amazing story of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation in this final chapter of Genesis. Joseph is Christ-like in his graciousness to his brothers. What is most fascinating is that we see in Joseph how God turns what was intended by humans for evil into good, a transformation which we call the *gospel* - good news! Because by faith, Joseph was able to turn a repentance to punishment story, which is our usual human expectation, into a repentance to transformation to forgiveness to reconciliation story, which is God's way! When Joseph's brothers discovered who Joseph really was, they were afraid because of their guilt. They knew what they had done, and begged for forgiveness, not expecting it. But Joseph remembered the story differently, because he knew what good had come in the long run from God placing him in Egypt, how he was able to help save Egypt from deadly famine with God's insight, and even save his own family. God had turned a tragic story of jealousy and slavery into a salvation story! Even though Joseph's brothers had intended evil for Joseph, God had turned it all into good. *Can God even turn all that is happening now out of our intentions for evil and revenge, into something good that will transform us and our world today?*

Good question! In the gospel story from Matthew, the prospects don't look good! It starts with Peter's question to Jesus, which is very practical: *"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"* (Peter low-balled it.) *Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy seven times."* (or as some would say, seventy times seven, with new math!) What Jesus really means is an "infinite" number of times - forgiveness should never end, there is no limit to grace! So it seems impossible, but

this is what God calls for in Jesus' new "family", which is the Church, the assembly of believers who follow Jesus in his Way. Unlimited forgiveness.

So then Jesus tells the parable of comparing the realm of God with that of a King who settled accounts with his servants. One servant owed him ten thousand talents, with one talent = 6,000 days wages, or 60 million denarii - which is a fortune, totally impossible to repay, like the national debt. The servant begged him for time to pay him back, so the king had pity, and forgave him the debt. But this same servant went out and threatened others with jail if they didn't repay him a smaller sum. When the king found out, he was furious, and threw him in prison. It's not a parable with a happy ending - it is instead a description of how we humans too often treat one another without mercy or grace, when God has forgiven us so much, even sending his Son, Jesus, to die for us, in order to give us life! So I guess I prefer Joseph's example to the story of the king and the wicked servant!

Paul comes right to the point in his letter to the Romans. *"We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living."* [This is a verse we read in our committal service for the burial of the dead.] But Paul goes on to say: *"So why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So then, each of us will be accountable to God."*

So when I first started thinking about this sermon, I asked myself the question: what is more important, being forgiven or having the willingness to forgive? Which is harder? Saying "I'm sorry" or "I forgive you?" Maybe the answer is "both!" Because we know how hard it is as individuals to own up to how we mistreat our neighbor, or deceive a friend, lie to a spouse or neglect a child. It takes a lot to apologize, and a transformation to make it right! But even more so, it takes a whole lot of grace to grant forgiveness to someone who has wronged us. Because it is a whole lot easier to nurse a grudge, to stay angry and write that person out of our lives, especially when we see that person as "not one of us". We even hold grudges against our own flesh and blood! So we know how difficult forgiveness can be. But that is what Jesus calls us to do, following him.

These days we are fully aware of the wrongs that people in our own nation and community are doing to one another. When we have leaders who will never admit guilt or wrong-doing, who never apologize, but just go on the attack, deflecting blame, and projecting their failures onto others. They set the example that too many of us find just too easy to follow, and just blame them for it. But it's

tearing us all apart. People of faith - Christians, Jews, Muslims and others, need to start setting a better example of forgiveness, mercy, and grace for others.

But forgiveness without repentance and transformation won't do it. We have seen terrible things happen in our society because of our partisanship in politics, systemic racism, fear of the "other", selfishness and greed. For example, a white female ex-police officer, Amber Guyger, was convicted last year for murdering a man in his own apartment, which the officer had entered by mistake, confusing him for an intruder. At her trial, the man's younger brother, Brandt Jean, took the stand, and told the officer that he forgave her, walked across the courtroom and hugged her. But that's not all, for it would be all too easy for us to end the story with this forgiving act, just like the families of the Emanuel Nine who were shot to death at bible study eventually forgave the shooter of their loved ones. Forgiveness is given because not to forgive, to hold onto vengeance and hate, just makes your own soul sick. Forgiveness leads to healing and closure, and leads to a new chapter in life, when you stop holding onto the past and the brokenness.

Brandt's words of forgiveness were later followed by his words to law enforcement officials, when he said that he, a black male, was not a threat or inherently dangerous. He implored them to create new policies and procedures that raised the value of all lives, to show that Black Lives do matter, the same as others do.

We know this year how much farther we have to go as a society and nation, since George Floyd was killed. There has been far too much violence and racial hatred shown on our streets, showing how much we have to transform policing in our communities to bring peace to our neighborhoods and healing to our hearts and broken bodies. The violence won't stop, nor will the peaceful protests that sometimes devolve into chaos, until justice and peace become the rule. For this to happen, repentance, transformational change, and forgiveness must occur.

So with all growing conflict in our nation the past four years, we have a great challenge ahead of us at the end of 2020. We will have to humble ourselves, learn how to repent and say we are sorry, and then learn to forgive all those whom we have come to see as adversaries and opponents. There are so many examples of "grievances" that we hardly know where to begin! Maybe that is why Jesus says to you and me, when we ask who and how many times we must forgive one another in the church as well as in society, Jesus says "seventy-times seven"!

But it will all have to begin here, with us, when you and I repent in each other's hearing, and forgive each other. Just like in sports, when we play one game at a time, forgiveness is given one person at a time. Repentance and forgiveness are at the core of our faith. This is how God makes in us a new creation, when old hatreds and grudges pass away, and new relationships are forged! It begins with

honesty, and with hard work, results in grace. So we ask God for the faith to follow Jesus's example, and learn how to forgive each other, one person at a time.