

Written Copy: Genesis 45:5-8 “Love Those Who Hate You?”

7th Sunday @ the Epiphany

Sunday, February 20th, 2022

Text: Genesis 45:5-8

⁵ And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷ And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ 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.

Exegetical Statement

When Joseph encounters his brothers who have come to Egypt to buy grain they do not recognize him, allowing him to test their character, to see if they have changed from the spiteful evil men who sold him into slavery. He finds them willing to sacrifice themselves rather than have their youngest brother Benjamin taken as a slave, which would break their father's heart. Joseph then reveals his true identity to them, convincing them that he is not angry with them, but has forgiven them, having been shown how their evil was used by God for a greater good, as part of his plan. God brought Joseph here and gave him the wisdom to prepare Egypt and now them to survive the famine. And they will be protected in Egypt set apart from being assimilated by pagan culture where they can grow in strength and number. He communicates his complete and unconditional forgiveness in word and action, promising to provide to them through the next 5 years of the famine, and give them and their father a safe home near him. Once they are convinced of his love and forgiveness they enjoy a time of fellowship and catching up that exemplifies the restored love and togetherness of the family

Focus Statement:

The only way we can truly forgive as Joseph did, and even more so as Jesus calls us to is through the gifts of faith and love. We understand that what Jesus calls us to do is how He has loved and forgiven us in His life, death, and resurrection. He changes our heart to see that these opportunities to forgive others as He forgives us is our chance to witness His love and grace in a very real way to others.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

Having been wronged like Joseph would struggle to forgive our brothers who left us for dead, sold into slavery. Still over time we might forgive because they are family. But Jesus call to forgive, pray, turn the other cheek, not demand our stuff back is definitely beyond our ability in our heart

What the hearer should do as a result:

Realize that the forgiveness we are called to exhibit is a work on progress that grows by the Spirit's work in us through Word and Sacrament. In all the ways we may suffer at the hands of others we look for ways to show Jesus' love for them through our forgiveness and loving those who hate us.

Subject Sentence: Loving our enemy as part of our witness to Christ

The Story of Joseph Forgiving His Brothers

Our Old Testament account of Joseph and his brothers who have wronged him so many years earlier is understandably the perfect plot line for several movies. And the best part, unlike some other Biblical stories, is it has a very happy ending. It warms our heart to see Joseph and his brothers come together again in an embrace. How was Joseph able to do this? Why not you may argue. Everything turned out great for him in Egypt. And because they are family, he is able to let their evil deeds of the past slide. But is that really what is going on here?

Let's go back to where it all started. Joseph is a young boy growing up in the land of Canaan, one of twelve brothers born to Jacob. But not just one of twelve in his father's eyes, Joseph is the favorite, born of his favorite wife Rachel who has since died giving birth to Joseph's youngest brother. Jacob loves Joseph more than his 10 older brothers and shows that special favoritism with the gift of a richly ornamented robe. Jacob's special favoritism shown to Joseph over his 10 older brothers causes serious issues in the family dynamic. But that's not the only problem.

They are all sent out to take care of the sheep, which means they are gone from home for extended periods of time as they find adequate pasture. Joseph is the youngest among them. And he seems to be the voice of conscience among his older brothers who do not always fly right. He let's them know when they are doing wrong and then reports their antics back to their father. This raises the brother's ire and animosity toward Joseph even more.

But even more aggravating for his brothers is Joseph's God given ability to foretell the future through his dreams. He dreams that one day all of his brothers, and even his father, will bow down in honor toward him. His older brothers truly hate this young tattletale, claiming that he will be so much greater than them, even greater than their father for gosh sakes, walking about bragging as he wears his special little coat! It all becomes too much for them. So on one of his spying trips, when they were grazing the flocks some distance from home, the brothers conspired against him. The original plan was to kill him and tell dad they found him after he had been attacked by a wild animal. But at the insistence of his oldest brother Rueben, they grabbed him, rip off his precious coat, and threw him into an empty well. Rueben's secret plan was to come back later, pull him out, and take him back to dad.

While Reuben is gone, and the other nine are eating lunch, a group of Midianite Merchants happen by. They decide it would be wrong to kill their own flesh and blood brother, but instead they should get rid of him, to prevent him from telling dad, by selling him to the Midianites as a slave. And that's what they do, selling him for 20 shekels of silver, which is less than the usual price that a slave would go for. When Reuben returns and finds him gone, they all realize they need to concoct a cover story to tell dad about what happened to his precious son. So they smear the blood of a goat all over the precious robe and take it back to their father who believes the story. Jacob goes into a deep and long time of mourning that no one can shake him out of. This served to add to the guilt that the 10 brothers were already dealing with. But they kept their deep dark secret for many years after.

Meanwhile Joseph is taken to Egypt and sold as a slave. He has times of success which always seem to end in tragedy. He rises up through the ranks and becomes the number one house manager of Potiphar, the captain of the guard for Pharaoh. He was successful in all he did because the LORD was with him. But when Potiphar's wife, in covering her own failed attempts to seduce Joseph, accuses him of attacking her, Joseph is sent to prison. But even here he excelled because the LORD was with him, and he was put in charge of all the other prisoners by the warden. His ability to foretell the future through dreams had not left him. Two of Pharaoh's servants who are also in prison tell Joseph their dreams which he successfully and truthfully explains. Joseph's predictions come true in both cases. But still he is left to languish in prison, that is until just the right time.

The right time comes when Pharaoh has a disturbing set of dreams. Pharaoh's servant then remembers Joseph and his ability, and he is brought before Pharaoh. Joseph hears Pharaoh's dreams and proclaims they are a message from the LORD God. There will be 7 years of unprecedented great abundance in the land, which will be followed by 7 years of an unprecedented time of great famine. With godly wisdom Joseph suggested that Pharaoh build storehouse cities to collect the abundance of crops so that they will have plenty to last through the times of famine. Pharaoh is so impressed with Joseph's ability and wisdom from the LORD that Pharaoh puts him in charge of the whole projects of saving and storing grain. Joseph is elevated to a position of power where the only one greater than him is Pharaoh himself.

Thus it is that his brothers come to Egypt in the midst of that time of famine and encounter Joseph. He recognizes them, but they do not recognize him as he is much older than when they last saw him, and because he is dressed like and speaking like an Egyptian. Now, put yourself in Joseph's place and all that he had been through. These brothers who did you wrong are completely in your power. Maybe you don't squash them, although it is within your power to do so. Instead maybe you mess with them, get even with them. At the very least maybe you turn them away and let them starve awhile.

But that's not what Joseph does. He gives them grain. In fact gives it to them for free. Yet he does test them; not in order to extract vengeance, but to see if they have changed, if they realize that what they had done so long ago was wrong in the eyes of the LORD and have repented. So he sets them up. He tells them he believes they are spies. They must prove their story is true by bring back their youngest brother they told him about. When they do Joseph hides a valuable in Benjamin's sack, and he is accused of being a thief. Joseph tells them Benjamin will be locked up in prison but the rest may return home. The brothers that sold him as a slave would've jumped at the chance to save their own skin. But these men are not the same as they used to be. They refuse to leave, and Judah offers himself as prisoner in exchange for the life of Benjamin.

It is this event that triggers what we have in our Old Testament account today. Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers. And more than that he assures them that there is no animosity left in him. There will be no getting even. He loves them and forgives them. He wants to care for them and provide for them, all of them, especially his beloved father whom he has missed all these years.

In all this Joseph demonstrates the kind of love and forgiveness that can only come from God. It came with a desire in Joseph's heart that they know the love and forgiveness of the LORD Himself and how He had been at work through their evil plans to provide the ultimate good of them and for many other nations around them. It came with the desire that his brothers have repentant hearts that can receive this great love that Joseph himself had received from the LORD. I'm not sure that I could as easily have forgiven them if I was Joseph, at least not without extracting some kind of vengeance, a little payback for what they had done. But that is not what was in Joseph's heart. He welcomes them back as his brothers and the reading closes with them sharing that special bond and love with one another.

What Jesus is Calling Us to Do

Now you could argue that the forgiveness Joseph extended is indeed worthy of our consideration, but after all these men were still his brothers, they were family. But what Jesus is calling us to do in our Gospel Lesson goes beyond the forgiveness extended to family members.

Luke 6:27-29 ²⁷ "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either.

Here Jesus is not talking about forgiving blood relatives. He is talking about loving and forgiving our enemies; or more accurately those who hate you. And there is a difference, there are those who we make out to be our enemies because of how we feel they have treated us, when they don't really see themselves as being enemies towards us. What Jesus is talking about here are those who express hatred toward you, curse and slander your name and reputation with unfounded lies. He is talking about those who publicly humiliate you with a backhand slap on the cheek, or in our day and age post evil things on your Facebook page and comment negatively on your posts. Jesus calls us to forgive and permit those who help themselves to our stuff without even asking. Jesus says not only are we not to retaliate, but to let them go further, and be willing to give them more than what they have taken if they need it. Really Jesus? You can't be serious! This has got to be an exaggeration to prove a point. But it's not.

Luke 6:35-36 ³⁵ But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. ³⁶ Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

Love your enemies, love those who hate you. And do so with the same love that comes from God, that sacrificial and unconditional love that He has for all men. The love that moves Him to be kind to the ungrateful and evil when we would desire to get even. This is the love that makes Him a gracious and merciful God. This is the love that can only come from Him, and was displayed for the whole world to see in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Christ came and performed the ultimate good for those who plotted to kill Him and caused Him to suffer and die. And He did it out of that sacrificial and unconditional love. He came as sent by the Heavenly Father, who offered His Only Son as the merciful offering to save all mankind from sin, death, and hell. He came to die and rise again to save you. That same forgiveness and love that Christ calls us to show and live out is the love, mercy and forgiveness He has in His heart for you, for me, for all men. That is how much He loves you.

How Christ Equips us to Love Those Who Hate Us

Because He knows we could never love and forgive as perfectly as He calls us to do, He came and earned that great reward that is eternal life for us by loving and forgiving His enemies. And because His suffering and death was for all men, He has shown this supernatural love and forgiveness to our enemies too. And through the wonderful gift of baptismal faith and the Holy Spirit He is at work in your life and mine to equip us to begin to be that loving and forgiving Christian He calls us to be. He is at work to point out those ways we fall short in our loving of others, and He removes that sin with His gift of grace, assuring us that He has made us right with the Father.

Our life on earth as Christians is the life-long process we call sanctification: the process of growing and becoming the holy people of God that Christ came to make us to be. It's the lifelong process of learning how to love and forgive our enemies, to share our stuff, to turn the other cheek, to be Christians- "little Christs". And the power behind this process is the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace to pour Jesus' love into our hearts.

And while He is at it He sometimes grants us the same kind of revelation that He gave Joseph. He shows us that all the hurtful things and acts that He allowed others to do against us, and even those we sometimes do to each other, serve a greater purpose. When we are called to publicly or privately to forgive others, we become a real-life example of the grace and mercy that Jesus Christ desires to reveal to the world through the Gospel. We become examples that can serve to change the world, one soul at a time by the faith the Holy Spirit uses us as tools to engender.

Conclusion

I'm not sure I am at Joseph's level of forgiving those who have wronged me. I struggle to forgive those who have lashed out against me wrongly. I struggle to really love and forgive those who are hateful and hurtful toward me. I struggle to forgive others as Jesus has forgiven me. I'm a work in progress, and you are too. When you do struggle with these things it helps to sit down and meditate on just how much you have been forgiven by the grace, love, and mercy of Jesus Christ. It helps to meditate on his Word and receive and be strengthened in His faith and His love in the Sacrament. And it helps to sit down and pray for those who do evil against you and speak evil against you. Pray for their heart and soul, that God would give to them the same kind of repentant hearts that He granted Joseph's brothers. That He would create in them the same kind of repentant heart He has created in me and you and is at work to keep alive and grow until the day He takes us home to be with Him. Amen.