

## While we are away ... reflections for the Pentecost season September 13, 2020 – 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

*We continue in the 'green' season of Pentecost, following Jesus and his ministry as we think about the Spirit-led ministry of the Church. Here is Pastor Steve's message for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost. Last Sunday, we had a wonderful outside service. We will try again on September 20 on our parking lot ("Praise Lot") at 9:30 am.*

### **Lessons for Pentecost 15**

*Psalm 103:1-5; Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35*

#### ***Is it more difficult to forgive or to receive forgiveness?***

Our Genesis lesson today brings us literally to the last chapter of the Joseph story. To recap: Joseph was one of 12 brothers born to Jacob and was Jacob's favorite. His brothers were jealous. One day, they overcame him, threw him in a pit, and sold him to slave traders bound for Egypt. The brothers took his cherished coat, a gift from Jacob, dipped it in blood and told their father that a wild animal had carried Joseph off. Joseph landed as a slave in the home of the Pharaoh. It was a shaky existence. At one point, he found himself alone and forgotten in prison after having been framed for a crime. Only when the Pharaoh had distressing dreams that he could not understand, did someone remember the prisoner, Joseph, who could interpret dreams. After hearing Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph understood that it meant the world would face 7 years of bountiful harvest to be followed by 7 years of famine. He became the agricultural minister to lead Egypt's planning. When the famine hit, peoples from neighboring lands came to Egypt to get grain, this included Jacob, who sent his sons to Egypt. When they arrived, Joseph recognized his brothers long before they recognized him. Joseph makes matters difficult for them before he finally reveals himself in a tear-filled reunion. Joseph arranges for them to bring Jacob and the whole family to Egypt to resettle. As our lesson opens today, Jacob had died. Despite being well fed and cared for in Egypt, Joseph's brothers are in distress! They are sure that with Jacob dead, Joseph will exact his revenge.

Yes, the brothers are in distress. Despite that tear-filled reunion. Despite Joseph's words to them at that time: "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." Despite having heard those words, despite receiving Joseph's hospitality. Despite Joseph's gracious welcoming of Jacob and his household, the brothers are in distress. They are in distress because of what they had done to Joseph. As the Psalmist said in Psalm 51: "I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me." Yes, they were distressed because they knew their sin. They remembered seeing the slave traders take their brother away. They remembered the anguish of their father when they presented him with the blood-stained coat of Joseph - an anguish that they knew he had lived with every day since. They were distressed - they could only imagine the hardships that Joseph had suffered. They were distressed - they knew how powerful Joseph had become - he held their lives in his hand. They are distressed because they are so sure that there is nothing they can do to merit forgiveness from their brother whom they wronged.

Did you notice how they cast their request for forgiveness by asking on behalf of their father? Joseph may hate them - deservedly so - but they know he loved his father, their father, Jacob. Joseph just might accept an appeal on behalf of their dead father. "Joseph, before Dad died, he wanted us to pass along one request: 'I beg you, forgive your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you'." They beg for forgiveness by calling up the image of their begging father: "please forgive them. Please forgive us."

***Is it more difficult to forgive or to receive forgiveness?***

Is it more difficult for Joseph to forgive or more difficult for the brothers to receive his forgiveness? The brothers were sure it was more difficult for Joseph to forgive them so they could not believe that he really did forgive them.

Forgiving – being forgiven – it is not easy stuff, but it is the stuff of living, the stuff of our lives. Forgiving can be a life-giving way of moving forward.

Last week, Jesus spoke of moving forward when there is wrong-doing in the church. He set out a whole procedure for working things out. Peter's question to Jesus today, comes as a follow-up: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? Seven times?" Peter's question suggests that there must be a limit to this forgiving. 7 times ought to do it. Of course, 7 is one of those numbers loaded with meaning. There are seven days in a week because God, after completing the creation in 6 days, added a seventh day, a day of rest – to complete the divine creative work. 7 is complete. So, Peter thinks, seven times should complete any forgiveness requirement. Jesus' answer, translated in a couple ways, blows up Peter's reasoning about there being a limit to forgiving and forgiveness. "7 times! You say, 7 times? I say to you, 77 times; I say to you, 70 times 7 times!"

Do you think Peter found this distressing? This call from Jesus to keep on forgiving? Jesus' instruction that there is no resting from forgiveness? No limits to forgiving? Perhaps at that moment, Peter did not like what he heard. But later, Peter will find himself as the recipient of unlimited forgiving that will allow him to move forward. That forgiveness, he will not deny.

***Is it more difficult to forgive or to receive forgiveness?***

Jesus tells a parable about a man in distress. The man is a slave and the king will settle his accounts. That slave has a debt – an incredible debt, you might say, an impossible debt -- 10,000 talents. One talent was worth about 15 years of a laborer's salary, billions of dollars today. It is not a real number, but Jesus is trying to make a **real point**: this is a debt that can never be repaid – Never! The slave makes an outrageous plea – "*Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.*" There is no way that this slave will ever repay the debt. The king could have just laughed in his face before sending him off – like Jabba the Hutt sending off Han Solo to be imprisoned in carbonite forever in Star Wars. But this king had pity – compassion -- and forgave the entire unpayable debt. Now the parable could end here with a wonderful party where the slave invited all his friends to share his good fortune.

But no, we watch as forgiveness bumps into limits. The slave is no sooner forgiven than he is provided a golden opportunity to "play it forward". A fellow slave who owes him a debt – much smaller 100 denarii, comes and makes the exact same plea – "*Have patience and I will repay you.*" But, no, the slave, forgiven of his multi-billion-dollar debt, has no desire to forgive or even give a grace period to his fellow servant. He casts him into jail with no pity - no compassion. Fortunately, there is an intervention, the king finds out and the unforgiving servant is given his 'just reward'.

***Is it more difficult to forgive or to receive forgiveness?***

How could a forgiven person prove to be so unforgiving? Where did this mean-spiritedness come from? And after such a glorious example of mercy – the king graciously forgiving the impossible debt. Thank goodness, there is another bright moment in the parable: the reaction of the fellow slaves to the other slave's mean-spiritedness. "When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed." Yes, they knew there was something wrong with their fellow servants' cruelty. They saw the injustice, they saw the discrepancy, they saw the wrong – so, they went and reported the injustice. They called it out. In so doing, they

gave witness to the incredibly gracious action of the king that set for a higher standard of forgiveness – governed by compassion, mercy with no limits. The slave’s act of mean-spiritedness was laid bare.

How could that slave, how could any person be so heartless? It is beyond the parable, but we could speculate as to the character of this slave – amassing debts, having debts owed him - what kind of scheming, what kind of trickery or treachery was in that slave’s past. But maybe the simple answer is this: the slave believed his own plea – he believed that he could repay the debt he owed the king. He was too arrogant to comprehend the act of forgiveness, the gracious gesture of the king. Maybe he did not know forgiveness, he never practiced it, he could not recognize it. He should have been more in touch with his fellow slaves - they could have taught him about forgiving and forgiveness. And, it’s too bad, he did not know our Psalmist today.

We had a musical presentation of Psalm 103, a tribute to God who is “kind and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”. I always remember this Psalm as the Fred Sponsler Psalm. Fred was a parishioner back in Philadelphia, whom I was called to visit in my early days of ministry. He was in the hospital – very sick – I think I knew he was dying. I was nervous walking down the hallway. I saw a nurse leaving his room and heard Fred’s voice as I entered his room:

*“Bless the Lord, O my soul, all that is within me bless his holy name, Bless the Lord, O my soul and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who redeems your life from the pit.”*

Those words gave me such comfort. I did not know the Psalm well enough to join him then, but every time I recite the Psalm, I am joining Fred and the communion of saints who have spoken these words of comfort, acknowledging their God and Savior; those saints who knew about forgiveness, who knew about our forgiving God, who knew about our crucified and resurrected Lord who gave himself, with no limits, his very life, an impossible cost. Jesus did this to show us that unmerited forgiveness is possible for God, that forgiveness is possible for us. Thanks be to God, we can receive forgiveness, we can forgive.

Amen