

## **Genesis 50:15-21**

<sup>15</sup>Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" <sup>16</sup>So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, <sup>17</sup>'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup>Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." <sup>19</sup>But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup>Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. <sup>21</sup>So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

## **Matthew 18:21-35**

<sup>21</sup>Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup>For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup>When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup>and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup>So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' <sup>27</sup>And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup>But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' <sup>29</sup>Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' <sup>30</sup>But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup>When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup>Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup>Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup>And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup>So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

## *Matthew 18:21-35 9-11-2011*

The last time this passage came up in the lectionary was on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11. As then, this week your thoughts may have turned to that tragic day and the loss of life and the change that brought to our world. The nerves are not as raw, some of the memories have faded but some will remain forever. We are not quite as pre-occupied with the remembrance as we were.

And I believe it is true that we have offered little or no forgiveness, to those who committed those horrendous acts and we never will. The acts were intentional and there has been no remorse. The loss is too great, the pain too deep in the soul.

All of that aside, and considering your relationships with others, those that are stressed or broken, those that are fully alive and healthy, what do you do with the lessons about forgiveness this week?

The Old Testament lesson is a story you all know about Joseph and the evil his brothers did selling him into slavery and then all the trials he faced as a result.

Now his brothers come and ask forgiveness for what they did and Joseph assures them that they and their families will be taken care of during the plague that struck the land.

Joseph forgives them.

Joseph gives us a peak at the radical nature of our God who sent His own Son to the cross to forgive the sins of the world.

Jesus, in His response to Peter's question shows us again the radical nature of our God when He says to him;

Forgive not seven times, but seventy-seven times, or some would interpret it 70 times 7 times, or 490.

That may be more than you can wrap your minds or hearts around.

Let me add as a side note here that this parable in our gospel lesson is one I don't know what to do with, and I discovered this week that scholars who are much smarter than I don't know either, evidenced by their silence on the parable.

I did not find, and neither did any of my colleagues find, one commentary that deals with it because the ending is so counter to what we are taught in the first part of the parable.

So you have these lessons on forgiveness that speak to you in some way now.

They may make you aware of your short comings in forgiving others. They may affirm your efforts, or process as you work to forgive someone. They may affirm your success at reconciling and restoring a relationship through your willingness to forgive.

We all know forgiveness is a tough thing and the greater the offense the more difficult the forgiving.

I cannot stand up here and tell you “You have to forgive today!” I know too much about forgiveness to say that to you.

I know forgiving is a process, and the process takes time, it can't be forced.

There are those who will find a way to forgive while others never will, and the rest are in between somewhere wrestling with the hurt, disappointment or betrayal.

Regardless of where this day finds you, or where these lessons find you, I can say this.

God still forgives you.

We pray here each week, and you may regularly pray at home,

“...forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...”

Therein lies our acknowledgement that we are unable on our own to forgive as we pray for God's help.

In his book, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton writes about hate and love saying;

The beginning of the fight against hatred, the basic Christian answer to hatred, is not the commandment to love, but what must necessarily come before in order to make the commandment bearable and comprehensible. It is a prior commandment, *to believe*. The root of Christian love is not the will to love, but *the faith that one is loved*. That faith that one is loved *by God*. That faith that one is loved by God although unworthy—or, rather, irrespective of one's worth!”<sup>1</sup>

It struck me this week that we might be able to say the same about vengeance, resentment, or hatred and forgiveness.

The beginning of the fight against vengeance, resentment or even hatred is not the commandment to forgive, but the commandment to *believe*. The root of Christian forgiveness is not the will to forgive...but *the faith that one is*

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Abbey of Gethsemane, Inc, 1961, page 74-75.

*forgiven.*—to believe that you are forgiven by God although unworthy—or  
irrespective of your worth.

Believing that you are forgiven by God is the beginning of your struggle to forgive  
the other one.

The act of believing begins right here in our remembering.

It is in your remembrance of the events of 2000 years ago when God's own Son,  
after surveying a world of broken lives and desolate hearts,  
chose to call down from heaven forgiveness, not vengeance, and in doing so  
made possible a future marked not by judgment but by mercy,

not by calculations but trust,  
not by despair but hope,  
not by fear but courage,  
not by violence but healing,  
not by scarcity but abundance,  
not by hate but love,  
and not by death but by new life.

That's the power of forgiveness.

The essence of forgiveness is lifting a burden, and it is your own burden that  
is lifted in your forgiving.

You can then see the other person, and in fact the world differently;  
closer to the way God sees it,

and live your life differently;  
closer to the way God wants you to live it..

May God give to all of us the belief and the strength to forgive, in which -- and *by*  
which -- we are called to live,

and grant us the faith and courage to walk into the future created by our  
forgiving.

Amen