

“Forgiveness”

Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Luke 6:27-38

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March 3, 2019

Two Sundays ago, before I left for a ‘leisurely’ trip up to VA, some of you may recall that my message concerned the remarkable, rather unbelievable words of Jesus to his disciples concerning how ‘blessed’ they would be because of their faith in Him: ‘blessed’ to be ‘poor,’ ‘hungry,’ ‘weeping,’ ‘hated,’ ‘insulted,’ etc. ‘Blessings’ to which our natural response might be... ‘Say WHAAAT?’

In reading the two passages for today, our reaction might be in the same vein. The O.T. story dealt with how Joseph responded to his brothers when they came seeking help from his boss the King (i.e., Pharaoh)... the same siblings that had sold their little brother into slavery, like so much CATTLE or COMMODITY; certainly not like KIN. His response? ***“Don’t be angry with yourselves... you shall be near me. ... I shall provide for you. ...And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them.”*** (Genesis 45:5, 11, 15) Say WHAAAT?

And then, in a subsequent part of that same “Sermon on the Plain” we were ‘blessed’ by a couple of weeks back, Jesus implores His followers to ***“Love your enemies...bless those who curse you...pray for those who abuse you... If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also... Lend, expect nothing in return...”*** (Luke 6:27-29, 35) Say WHAAAT?

BOTH of these stories deal with one of the most difficult concepts we can grapple with in our lives... **FORGIVENESS**. It is no wonder that last year when I asked for some input from our congregation on what to preach on, the “Survey Said: Forgiveness” ...the topic most often mentioned. That is why when it came about that this subject was to be addressed the week I was to be gone, I knew it was meaningful enough to ‘amend’ the sermon schedule. (Which, as the preacher, IS my prerogative...☺). Even though it would mean that the same lectionary Scriptures would be considered in successive weeks. The topic of **“Forgiveness”** is THAT important. I personally believe that it is the act of ‘forgiveness’ that lies at the very heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You know... the same Jesus who spoke these words as some of His final ones on earth: ***“Father, forgive them...”*** Even in the face of the pain, suffering and death He experienced at the hands of both Jew and Gentile, Jesus spoke with His dying breath a message of **forgiveness**.

Both of these stories make the point that the wrongs that we suffer at the hands of another serve a much greater purpose than an opportunity for us to **show mercy** to one who has injured us. Demonstrating forgiveness is so much more than simply showing how 'magnanimous,' how 'good' and 'holy' we are in displaying a **noble character trait**. The act of forgiving is not so much for the benefit of the one *receiving* forgiveness, but rather, for the one *giving* forgiveness.

For one, forgiveness can bring us to a place of awareness of God's greater plan for our lives. In Joseph's case, he could have been consumed by the **betrayal** of his own brothers. He could have harbored such animosity toward those who had shown such a total lack of love and concern for him that he would have been rendered intensely bitter and utterly ineffective. But instead he rose above feelings of anger and self-pity to become a respected and powerful administrator in an *Egyptian* kingdom... not bad for a former *Jewish* slave, right?!

HOW? Well, perhaps in part because Joseph was a 'dreamer.' Remember, it was his visions that had gotten him in so much trouble with his brothers... and yet, had ingratiated him to Pharaoh. Visions that dwelt not in the *past*, but instead looked to the *future*. Dreams that Joseph knew came not from his 'fertile imagination,' but from GOD... revealing His plan for His people. 'Little bro' told his trembling brethren, ***"Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves... (for) 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."*** (Genesis 45:5, 8)

Joseph was confident that his experiences, both good and bad, were all a part of God's greater purposes... revealed to him in part through his visions and dreams. And when his long-lost brothers came to seek relief from their famine... both of a physical and spiritual variety... Joseph could see the hand of God at work. And much to his siblings' surprise, he offered them NOT the punishment they knew that they deserved, but rather, a glimpse into God's purpose and providence. ***"God sent me (here) before you to preserve life."*** (Genesis 45:5)

Joseph lived up to the Hebrew translation of his name: *"Increase."* He helped Pharaoh to 'increase' his kingdom. He helped his brothers to 'increase' their chances to live by providing for their needs. His example helped all who witnessed his wisdom and grace to 'increase' in their faith in God. Joseph would have agreed with the words of another humble, hard-working

servant, John the Baptist: **“He (GOD) must increase; I must decrease.”** (John 3:30) ‘Decrease’ in personal resentment and pride; ‘Increase’ in God’s humility and forgiveness.

Aside from the ability to forgive demonstrating a trust in God’s providence, and therefore a testimony of faith to others, there is also that aspect, as I alluded to earlier, of forgiveness that is **self-serving**. In truth, one could argue that the act of forgiving is done not so much for the *other* person, but for OURSELVES!

As most of you know, I spent some time in the pharmaceutical sales industry. Which means I spent a lot of time sitting in doctors’ offices. Even more that you all do NOW! And the most productive time of waiting I ever had was when I came across this bit of ‘grandma’s wisdom’: “Anger/bitterness/hatred are acids that do more damage to the vessel in which *stored* than the object on which *poured*.”

We forgive others in order to bring ourselves closer to God in the **here-and-now...** a present-day benefit to us. We may declare with our lips how much we ‘want to be like Jesus.’ Well how MUCH are we willing to ACT like Jesus? The One who, like His Father (‘the fruit doesn’t fall to far from the tree!’) **“is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.”** (Luke 6:35) In the words of our esteemed CPSO Sherriff Tony Mancuso, too often we can be like many he sees in his line-of-work: when others have injured them, they want **justice**; when they have done the injuring, they want **mercy**. Can we not be that way before our Almighty ‘Judge’?

You and I are entrusted with ushering in God’s *heavenly* kingdom by living by its principles in this *earthly* one. Jesus’ words to His ancient disciples are meant just as much for us, His current ones: **“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. ³⁷ “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ give, and it will be given to you. ... for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”** (Luke 6:36-38)

I am reminded of a saying many of you may have heard before: *“What if all that you had when you woke up in the morning was what you gave thanks for the night before?”* What if we apply that to the principle of *forgiveness*? What if the extent to which you were forgiven was that for which you had forgiven someone else? Though we might find it troubling... perhaps the point?... we should not forget those words of Jesus in Matthew 6, just after the

Lord's Prayer, that relate to the importance of 'forgiving' and BEING 'forgiven'... ***"If you do not forgive men their sins, you Father will not forgive your sins."*** (Matthew 6:14) One of those many statements of Jesus that makes you go 'Hmmm...'

There is also that aspect of **forgiveness that prepares us for eternity**. The Epistle lesson for these lectionary passages from 'this/last' week was from *1 Corinthians 15*, as it relates to the Resurrection: ***"If Christ has NOT been raised from the dead, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins."*** (1 Cor. 15:17) In contemplating our readiness for eternity, we must recognize that we are perishable... **mortal**... we are **sinful**. As such, we cannot enter an **imperishable, im-mortal, sin-less kingdom of God**. We must be **changed!** Jesus is the HOPE EMBODIED that we CAN be changed! That just as we will one day share in a **resurrection** like His, so too can we share in those **qualities** that will only be made complete in heaven. Like **forgiveness**. As we seek to fulfill Jesus' commands to us... ***"Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expect nothing in return"***... He assures us that ***"Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High."*** (Luke 6:35)

There are countless examples of how mortal men and women have demonstrated the immortal quality of forgiveness. I would imagine many of you know of those who, by their Godly display of forgiving, have shown themselves to be ***"children of the Most High."*** Perhaps even you yourself have been such an example of God's forgiveness to others.

One of the most memorable examples for me came in June of 2015, when 9 faithful members of Emmanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston S.C. were ruthlessly gunned down by a 21 year-old shooter after welcoming the deranged young man to their Bible study. Ranging in age from a 26 year old recent college graduate to an 87 year-old choir member, many of their grief-stricken family members spoke out in the days to come. Here's a few of the quotes:

"I forgive you," Nadine Collier, the daughter of 70-year-old Ethel Lance, said at the hearing, her voice breaking with emotion. "You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul... .. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. **If God forgives you, I forgive you.**"

"For me, **I'm a work in progress**. And I acknowledge that I am very **angry**. But one thing that (my sister) DePayne taught me that we are the **family that love built**. We have no room for

hating, so **we have to forgive**. I pray God on your soul.” – sister of DePayne Middleton Doctor, 49 year-old mother of 4 and college admissions coordinator.

“We would like him to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. **Give your life to the one who matters most: Christ**. So that He can change him and change your ways, so **no matter what happens** to you, **you’ll be okay**.” –Relative of Myra Thompson, 59 year-old trustee, ministry student

There WILL be times in our life when we are hurt deeply. When we suffer great loss. When we are **angry**. But as **the family that love built...** the love of God in Christ... we must have **no room for hating**; we **have to forgive**. **If God forgives, so must we**. We must remember that the root word of ‘for-give’ is to GIVE. As we have been given, so too must we give... as we have been FOR-given, so too must we FOR-give. Let us give, for-give, and LIVE by the standards of God, the only Righteous Judge, that we are to **up-hold** for **ourselves**, and **hold-up** for **others**: ***“Give your life to the one who matters most: Christ. So that no matter what happens, you’ll be okay.”***

CHARGE: I would leave you with two final quotes on the subject of forgiveness. One from Max Lucado, a very popular Christian author and pastor. He said that *“Forgiveness is unlocking the door to set someone free... and discovering you were the prisoner.”* And the second from the person who *should* have the last word, Jesus Christ: ***“Forgive, and you will be forgiven... for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”*** (Luke 6:37-38) Remembering that our forgiveness of others most benefits ourselves, may we go out to give to others the freedom we have in Jesus Christ. And as we do so, let us never forget that we do NOT go alone...