FORGIVENESS: The Way to Life and Freedom

All merciful God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life, having forgiven those who crucified him: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow the path of forgiveness in Christ’s holy footsteps, now and forever. Amen.


This kind of “fast forward” is what we have got, since last week, as we jump ahead several years in the Joseph story. Last week, Joseph’s brothers barely avoided killing him, and sold him into slavery instead. The brothers were jealous because the sons of Jacob’s favorite wife, Rachel, were Jacob’s favorite children, Benjamin and Joseph—and he doted upon Joseph. So, OK, Joseph was spoiled. And the other brothers hated it. The oldest brother, Reuban, managed to keep them from killing him by suggesting they throw him into a pit instead. But then they realized they could make a profit on their brother. Sin, sin, sin. So they sold him to a caravan headed to Egypt for 20 pieces of silver, and lied to their dad.

The lectionary now skips over how he was sold to Potiphar, pharaoh’s captain of the guard, and was so competent that Potiphar put him in charge over everything. But Potiphar’s wife wanted Joseph who refused her, so she lied that Joseph, one of those Hebrews, had ravished her—and Potiphar threw him into the dungeon (reminds me of Nelson Mandela). In prison he helped people. You remember the one morning he interpreted two prisoners’ dreams, and both came true: the one was released, and the other was beheaded. The one released was pharaoh’s cup-bearer, and though he promised to put in a good word for Joseph, he forgot. So Joseph languished in the dungeon for 2 years. But then, when pharaoh had some strange dreams that no one could understand, the cup-bearer remembered that there was this guy in the dungeon who might help. So they hauled Joseph out, and he interpreted the dreams of 7 lean cows devouring 7 fat cows as 7 years of abundant crops would be devoured by 7 years of famine. So Joseph was put in charge of saving food from the first 7 years, which he did. Then two years into the famine, everyone in the middle east were starving, except for Egypt.
Which brings us to today, 7 chapters later, having skipped over all that rich drama and detail, when we fast forward to what happened when Jacob and his family were starving in Canaan. Jacob sent his sons to see if the rumor of food in Egypt was true. And when they show up, the guy in charge of all the food—was the brother they managed not to kill.

They didn’t recognize him at first—but Joseph recognized them. He didn’t reveal his identity right away. When he did, it was a dramatic, emotional moment for them all—today’s portion.

I wonder how Joseph felt. His brothers: the ones who hated him and the ones who loved him. The ones who tried to murder him and the ones who saved him. The lost years he had in the dungeon because of them. The unfairness of it; the injustice; the meanness.

What’s he gonna do?

It’s one of the great and telling stories in the Judeo-Christian tradition that this forebearer of our faith, Joseph, gave food to his family, and finally forgave his brothers, and was reconciled with them.

It wasn’t easy. It wasn’t automatic. But he did it. He did not ‘make them pay.’ He could have been so horrible to them, and no one would have blamed him. But he didn’t. He did not repay them evil with evil; he repaid them evil with good.

Why? Joseph can see the bigger picture. He says, “. . . do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.”

This is God’s work of redemption. Not that God set it up for the brothers to sell Joseph so that Joseph could make Egypt the bread-basket. It’s not cause-and-effect that way. Rather, God works with us—even working with our sin and immaturity and smallness and blindness and greed—all of it—as well as with our goodness, and compassion, and activism, and good deeds and good intentions—TO MAKE LIFE, AND FREEDOM.

There’s a similar line in the Moses story: Pharaoh meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. In this case, it was the brothers who intended evil, but God made it work out not only for good, but for life—and not just for life for Jacob’s family, but life for thousands of people all over the middle east.

If Joseph’s brothers had killed him, they would also have killed themselves: for in the day that they were starving, if Egypt had not had food, they would have been vulnerable like everyone else. We are all connected—and in saving his life, they (unknowingly) saved their own.

But they still would have starved had not Joseph forgiven them.
**FORGIVENESS ISN’T FAIR.** And much of the time, FORGIVENESS ISN’T JUST, either. The brothers *deserved to suffer* for what they had done. This is retributive justice. There are lots of places and people and movies and stories of revenge, and pay-back, and often one feels that “justice has been done” in the end.

But today we hear a central message in Scripture, absolutely foundational to both the Jewish and Christian traditions: and that is that *revenge is not an option for a Christian*. Our call is to participate in God’s work of redemption and healing through FORGIVENESS.

In a certain way, this is what we read from the Canaanite woman in our Gospel, as well. She is vulnerable and needy—her daughter is sick. Jesus drew a line that excluded her. If I’d been she, I’d have felt insulted. But the woman did not hold the insult against him. She *did not take offense*—which, in my book, is a kind of forgiveness. Instead, she uses wit, and matches his metaphor, and stands her ground, continuing to ask. And the whole conversation shifts—Jesus sees something different—and the daughter is healed.

I want to offer some thoughts about forgiveness, this difficult, essential work we are called to.

1. The culture seems to think that sin, or mistakes, or insults, etc. are things that *cannot be forgiven*. But that’s why God *made* forgiveness—for the big and little fault and flaws and evils of humans. Nothing is beyond forgiveness.
2. However, forgiveness is real, and deep, and not a shallow hand-out. It is not “cheap grace”. It costs something—it takes time and effort—and it is always, always worth the cost.
3. In fact, the depth of Forgiveness is a gift from God. You cannot produce it by your own volition. But you can seek to set up the conditions whereby God may grant you this gift. My friend struggled with resentment over her husband’s abandonment of her and their three boys. But she prayed for him, and she prayed for herself, that God would, in the fullness of time, grant her the freedom to forgive him. Then one day, he showed up in church with another woman, and sat right behind her. She was beside herself, and struggled not to let the anger overcome her—and started praying fervently. —And at the passing of the Peace of Christ, when she turned with her hand held out, it was all gone. She was able to pray for Christ’s peace for him, truly, with a peaceful heart. It was a miracle. She had prepared; and when God gave the gift, it took.
4. TO FORGIVE SOMEONE IS **NOT** TO SAY WHAT HAPPENED IS ‘OK’. No. It was NOT oK. We’re inclined to respond to “I’m sorry” with “It’s OK.” But this is wrong.
5. TO FORGIVE SOMEONE IS *also* NOT to release them from divine judgment or to give them cosmic freedom. We do not control their salvation, whether we forgive them or not. God is in charge of that person, and that’s God’s job.
6. Rather, for us to forgive is to release the other to God and to release ourselves from the constant pain and anger that the memory of their action or inaction has been causing
us. To forgive is to be able to remember what occurred with a certain equanimity without reliving the rage and anguish all over again.

(7) We don’t take seriously enough the motivating power of guilt in the human person. When people are guilty, and they know it in their soul, they may think / believe they cannot be forgiven, and they cannot forgive themselves. The result of THIS is anger, violence, defensiveness—a kind of cover-up. It’s to avoid being part of this cycle that we have the Confession in our liturgy every week, and why we end every day with a recollection of our sins of that day, seeking forgiveness from God, so that we may sleep in peace and awake with a light heart.

My friends, pay attention to Joseph, and to the Canaanite woman, and allow yourself to reflect on FORGIVENESS in your life. For this is not optional for us. Listen to the injunction in the Lord’s prayer: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” In Matthew’s version, in the sermon on the mount, chapter 6, it’s very clear that we can expect to be forgiven to the extent that we forgive others.

This is not Jesus being mean. Rather, if we do not forgive, our heart is hardened, and we are literally unable to receive the forgiveness God is offering to us.

We know this is true. If you’ve ever done something, or failed to do something, and you were wrong and you knew it, and someone forgave you, you know very well that what is more important than justice is MERCY. Forgiveness may not be fair, may not even be just; but FORGIVENESS IS MERCY. And therefore, FORGIVENESS IS FREEDOM.

We cannot make it right by holding on to the rage, the injustice. But we don’t’ have to make it right: That is God’s job, and that is exactly why he sent Jesus. God is constantly redeeming, reworking, making things come round right.
And we have a part to play.
If there is an open wound, do the work of reconciling. PRAY for the gift of forgiveness.
If you are in the wrong, apologize—speak it, or write a note.
If someone has wronged you, be in prayer, and ask God to release you from the power this wrong, this injustice, this slight, has over you. Pray for the one who has wronged you, asking God to redeem the person. Be bold, and if you can, ask for a new relationship with that person.

THIS is why there is church. THIS is why there is Jesus Christ.
People are sinners. We’re finite, immature, small, blind. And we hurt each other.
And those of us who follow Jesus Christ are required to forgive: come to forgive, open to the gift, intend to come to the place where one can forgive. We MUST. But also, we MAY. The holy Spirit enables us, urges us to forgive—for there is nothing God wants for us more than mercy—and freedom. Thanks be to God!