

BIBLE READINGS: Genesis 50: 15-21 Matthew 18:21-35

SERMON

The theme of the Genesis story *and* in the Matthew reading is forgiveness. But forgiveness needs a context and there are two key elements in the context. Before we can fully grasp what the stories from Genesis and Matthew have to say about forgiveness, we need to understand what they say about guilt and about vengeance. The eleven brothers of Joseph - who had sold him into slavery - knew about guilt.

When they were eventually discovered by Joseph, in guilt – they expected the worst.

So too the servant of the king in the parable of the Gospel. He owed a debt that was unimaginable, perhaps something like a billion dollars in today's money. In any case, it was a larger debt than the servant could ever repay. And he knew that he was guilty of defaulting on his debt to the King. So like the eleven brothers, he too - in guilt - was full of fear.

We all know about guilt and the fear of being “found out:”

Which of us has not or does not idolise someone or something higher than God - maybe its money, or fame, or power, or popularity, or an artificial high?

Which of us has not lied to a friend?

Which of us has not betrayed a friendship?

Which of us has not disobeyed the command to love the neighbour?

And which of us have not polluted the environment or ignored the weak?

As John Claypool – an Episcopal (Anglican) theologian - wrote, we are all *value-cherishing creatures*. That is, certain principles and ideals are important to us. We can't violate them and go away untouched. And how do we deal with such guilt? One typical response is vengeance.

The Genesis text is just a bit ambiguous about Joseph's internal feelings when he re-encountered his brothers. Probably vengeance. The parable in Matthew tells a story of the second servant who owed a small debt to the first servant. In response to his plea for mercy, the first servant had him thrown into jail. Vengeance.

And the King who had initially forgiven the first servant a huge, astronomical debt, was so offended that he threw him into jail. Vengeance.

And Peter, in the Gospel, in asking if he should forgive someone who had offended him as many as seven times - what he was really saying is that, at some point, vengeance might be appropriate. Now vengeance is not the only response to guilt. *Repression* is another, often surfacing in anxiety and physical and emotional pain. Sometimes we try to water down the guilt by saying “everybody's doing it” - but right and wrong can't be determined by popular vote. *Self-punishment* is still another strategy. Soren Kierkegaard's father cursed God as a young boy, then out of guilt spent the rest of his life in doing good works - failing to make up for his outburst.

So these stories are about guilt and vengeance. But, thanks be to God, the core of these stories is about forgiveness.

This is not the forgiveness of I'll forgive you if you'll forgive me - that's just tit-for-tat repackaged

This is not the forgiveness that Joseph's brothers imagined when they said, “if you'll forgive us then we will be your servants.”

This is not the forgiveness of the master who said “you’ll be free only when you’ve paid your debt in full”

This is not the forgiveness Peter imagined when he suggested forgiving a person seven times—for keeping count is not the same as forgiveness

And this is not the forgiveness of “now you owe me” - as though forgiveness is money in the bank to be collected later. No, this is forgiveness so lavish and unconditional as to be unimaginable. That’s what Jesus meant when he responded to Peter by saying one should forgive another not seven times but seventy times seven—an unimaginable number.

And it’s what Jesus pointed to in the parable when the King forgave a debt past recounting. It’s what Joseph did when, the second time around, he wept at his brothers’ fear and trembling.

It is our God who says “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.” And again, “So far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our sins from us.”

So wherever you are at today, whatever you may harbour in the deep places of your soul - God’s promise is this: “my gracious forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”

There’s one more word here - the word is restoration. It’s what happened when Joseph told his brothers that they would enjoy care and safety - they and their children. It’s what happened to the servant in the parable when freed of his massive, uncountable debt

Jesus bids those who are restored by His gift of forgiveness to turn things around for others - that they too may be restored. It’s what he told Peter to do - “forgive others,” he said, “and unconditionally.” It was Christ who taught us to pray, “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

It’s not easy to ask for forgiveness. Some say the three most difficult words to express are these: “please forgive me.” It is difficult to overcome our denial, our self-righteousness, our fear - in fact, it sometimes ties us in knots.

It is often not easy to forgive either. “You are forgiven” may be the next most difficult words to express. We often want to see who will make the first move - it’s back to tit-for-tat again - a kind of conditional forgiveness.

In order to ask for or to offer forgiveness, most of us need a change of heart which God, by his spirit, promises to each of us. And forgiveness received becomes the beginning of restoration for both the forgiven and the forgiver.

And such forgiveness is life changing.

You come away free, without the burdens of guilt or vengeance
You come away loved by a God who promises to stay with you no matter what
You come away with hope, for God is at work in the world, in this community of faith and in your life.

We have God’s word on that. Amazing Grace!

Some Questions to Reflect Upon:

* Is there someone you need to forgive? Perhaps yourself? Maybe a family member?

- * Do you find it harder to extend or to receive forgiveness? Why?
- * What are the "sticking points" in extending and receiving forgiveness?