

Forgive Us Our Debts
(Gen 50:15-21; Matt 18:21-25)

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Rev. J. Koyama

Forgiveness is Clearly Central

Some Sundays, the readings offer us a variety of themes to choose from. But that is not the case today. The focus of today's readings are on forgiveness. And this gives us a good opportunity to emphasize how central it is to our faith.

It is in the Lord's Prayer, where "hallowing God's name" and "forgiving our debtors as we have been forgiven" are the two things that are required of us. All the rest of the prayer refers to what God does for us. Confession and forgiveness are built into our weekly bulletin. And each month during communion Jesus reminds us that the cup we are to drink from is his blood "shed for us, for the forgiveness of our sins".

This emphasis on forgiveness, highlights Jesus's concern that we who follow him should concern ourselves with putting it into practice. And this morning's Gospel is a cautionary tale, in which Jesus warns us against what can happen when we fail to practice it.

A Cautionary Tale

When Jesus tells us a story about someone else, we can usually assume that he is telling us something about ourselves that would be difficult to swallow if we were to hear it directly. And this is one of those stories.

He tells us about a slave, who owed his master way more than he could pay back. The slave when called to account, falls to his knees and begs for mercy, promising to pay back everything, if his master will only be patient. The master shows him mercy and gives him another chance. That same slave, when he, in turn, goes to collect from the people who owe him, shows no mercy. And when news of what this slave has done gets back to the master, the master basically goes ballistic and hands him over to be tortured until he repays his debt.

It is an eye-opening story that invites us to reflect on how much we have received and how much we have gotten away with in life. Most of us, except perhaps the most unfortunate among us, have been on the receiving end of tremendous blessings since the day we were born. Parents and teachers and people in every occupation have given and even now, are giving of their time and energy to provide us with food, safety, shelter, roads, schools, entertainment, education; all the things that we enjoy and very easily take for granted.

A Debt of Gratitude

But those blessings don't begin or end with what we human beings do for each other. We are really only the givers in a secondary way; intermediaries who shape and deliver what God has already provided.

The truth that is easily forgotten is that everything begins with what God has done for us. It begins with the very gift of life itself; with body, mind and native abilities; none of which any human hand can claim credit for creating. And from the same creator's hand, we receive the gift of the plants and animals, that nourish us with food and provide us with companionship. From God's hand we receive the materials with which we build our shelters and power our vehicles.

God provided all of it. And, even though the idea that we are "slaves" is grating to our modern sensibilities, it does accurately describe how totally dependent on God we are for everything necessary for life.

What God has given us is a gift so great that the idea that we could ever claim to balance the scales and walk away debt free is delusional. It is a gift so great that we can only respond to it with sincere gratitude. And we can only demonstrate our sincerity by following the example God

has set for us; by treating others with the same kindness God has shown to us.

The Unmerciful Slaves

What is strange is that, just because someone has been well treated (even beyond deserving), doesn't mean that he or she will be grateful or generous to others in turn. You would think so. But it appears that in many cases it is quite the opposite. People who have been treated very well, often treat others very poorly, just as the well treated slave in the story, was unwilling to be merciful toward others.

For example, a worker may be quite happy to be covered by his fellow workers who, out of the goodness of their hearts, volunteer to take on his workload while he is away sick. But then when it is his turn to do the same for others, he quietly declines. Of course, he is sure that he is way too busy or has many other valid reasons why now is not the time. There are many little ways that a person can quietly ride the backs of others, and take without giving in return.

God is Most Certainly Angered

What I think is most eye-opening in the story that Jesus tells, is God's response to the unmerciful behavior of his slave. God goes ballistic and

sends him off to be tortured until he repents and pays back what he owes!

That is definitely eye-opening to those of us who are accustomed to thinking that God will be kind and forgiving enough to turn a blind eye to our own failings, even as we look with angry judgement on the wrong doing of others.

It is pretty clear what Jesus is telling us here. He is telling us that our loving God, who is “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” is, at the same time, incredibly angered when we take advantage of his blessings and forgiveness, and yet deny it to others.

And the good news for those of us who are hearing the story, is that it is still a cautionary tale. We can still correct the situation by practicing forgiveness and treating others with the same mercy and compassion God has shown to us.

The Redemptive Power of Forgiveness

And the Old Testament Story of Joseph that we read first, provides us with an example of an ancestor who did just that. I’m referring to

Joseph, who having been so mistreated by his brothers, responded to their treachery by forgiving them and giving them a second chance.

As you may recall, when he was a boy, Joseph's father gave him a beautiful coat. And in his happiness he paraded in front of his brothers. But his brothers were less than charmed. And in jealous anger, they threw him into a pit and abandoned him. Then one of his brothers secretly lifted him out and sold him to a passing caravan. So, Joseph grew up separated from his family and found his way up the ladder as a servant of the Pharaoh in Egypt.

It is hard to imagine the trauma he must have felt over being betrayed in this way by his own brothers. Perhaps it is one reason why he had such vivid dreams. He could have hated them and been eaten away by the poison of bitterness. But he came to see, in part through the subsequent events in his life, and through his dreams, how the hand of God kept delivering him and putting him in situations of increasing power.

And so, when his brothers came to see him, he saw that God had given him the power of life and death over their situation. He could have chosen death for the brothers who had betrayed him. But instead he

chose life. He forgave them and wept over them and in so doing, he saved them from the famine that was in the land.

Redemptive Suffering

In some ways, the story of how Joseph was betrayed and then forgave his brothers, runs parallel to the way Jesus was betrayed by his disciples and followers, and how he forgave them, even as he hung in agony on the cross.

What both of these stories point us toward is the triumph of love and forgiveness over sin and death. That when we are betrayed and when we suffer the pain of betrayal, tragedy and death may seem to be the only possible outcome. But it is also possible to find that something else is being worked out that is hidden in the suffering; something that will lead to salvation.

As I understand it, there are two options. The first is that we let our anger and hatred and the need to punish (which may very well be justified), determine the course of our actions. That is the kind of suffering that ends in death.

But there is another kind of suffering that ends in life, where we trust that there must be some redemptive possibility in our suffering, and we have to wait until God shows it to us. Just because we have been wronged and we are suffering for it, does not mean that God will not use what has happened to do something good. And whether God uses the situation for good, depends in part on how we react. And this is where forgiveness comes in.

We know that forgiveness can take time, sometimes a long time. But once we have been able to forgive, it is like being washed over by a cleansing stream. “Poof” The various scenarios that we obsessed over that would make our case and restore balance to the world vanish. And we are free! . And that freedom makes it possible for us to suddenly see a bigger picture and to see how, unbeknown to us, God has repositioned us in a new way to be a force for good.

Sometimes that can mean, we have a new power to mend fences and restore a family and sometimes that can mean, walking away without a fight. But somewhere in every situation in which we have been deeply hurt, lies a latent power to set others free as well as ourselves. But in order to serve this redemptive purpose, we need to be able to forgive and free ourselves from the need to be vindicated. Because only then can we see clearly.

There is another important lesson embedded in this part of Joseph's story that I'd like to lift up in closing. It stems from the fact that it is by no means clear that, in coming to him, his brothers are actually sorry for what they did to him.

Clearly, one reason they are asking his forgiveness is because they are afraid that he will have them executed, and they need his help to survive the famine. And when they ask forgiveness, they tell him that it is what their father told them to do. And finally, when they burst into tears, it may or may not be a sign of inward repentance. It could be that they are only shedding tears of relief that he didn't have them executed. The actions of Joseph's brothers can be interpreted either way, as repentant or entirely unrepentant.

And this brings up a really important point about forgiveness. And that is that repentance on the part of the perpetrator is not necessarily a precondition that must be met in order for us to be able to forgive. Unsatisfactory as it may seem, it is still possible to forgive someone and still be aware that the person who did the damage is not genuinely repentant and that you may never see justice served.

Sometimes, for the good of all, Jesus calls us to accept the pain of being treated unjustly without striking back, as he did, when he bore his cross. Sometimes we have to be bigger than the one who has wronged us, by bearing the pain in silence for the sake of a greater good.

So it seems to me that taken together, today's scriptures point us toward the practice of forgiveness as an important step on the path to redemption, both for our own souls and practically, because sometimes, through forgiveness families that belong together, are able to stay together and move on to a better future, where none seemed possible. That is what Joseph did for his family, when he forgave his brothers and gave them grain. And it is something we can do for our families, our family of faith, for our fellow citizens and for our global family.