

Wednesday, March 23rd, 2022

Mercy in Relationships

Pastor Chris Matthis, Epiphany Lutheran Church

Preached at Ascension Lutheran Church, Littleton, Colorado

Text: Genesis 45:1-15; Ephesians 4:25-32; John 13:34-35

Focus: God forgives us unconditionally.

Function: That they would forgive others as God in Christ Jesus has forgiven them.

Locus: "So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us" (SC, 5th Petition of the Lord's Prayer).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Forgiveness is hard work. And anybody who tells you differently either is lying or has never been offended in such a way that the limits of their love were tested. As Christians we know we're *supposed* to forgive others. Jesus says, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:14-15).

But that's easier said than done. Knowing and doing are entirely different affairs. As C.S. Lewis writes, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive..."¹

How do you forgive parents who abused you or walked out on your family? How do you forgive a spouse who cheated on you? How do you forgive a rebellious child who runs away and gets mixed up in drugs and the streets? How do you forgive a brother or sister who steals your inheritance? How do you forgive a boss who fires you or an employee who steals from you? How do you forgive a friend who betrays your confidence and trust? How do you forgive 9/11 or the Rwandan genocide or the Nazi Holocaust? How do you forgive the Russian invasion of Ukraine?

Lewis suggests that "if we really want... to learn how to forgive, perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo." He encourages us to begin with smaller offenses committed by the people in our close circles. And yet it is the people nearest and dearest to us whose slights and cuts hurt the most.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Kindle ed.

In the Book of Genesis, Jacob's son Joseph faced a formidable offense to forgive: his own brothers had sold him into slavery, lied and told their father he was dead, and then forgot about him as he languished in an Egyptian prison for many years. Through a miraculous series of events that I don't have time to tell, Joseph got out of prison and rose to prominence in Pharaoh's court when we won the king's trust by interpreting his dreams. Joseph became Pharaoh's right-hand man and was put in charge of a huge economic initiative to provide famine relief.

Our Old Testament lesson today picks up after Joseph's elevation. His brothers come to Egypt to buy grain in order to save their families from starvation. But to buy grain, they have to do business with Joseph first. Little do they know that the terrifying Egyptian official they're dealing with is their brother Joseph, whom they betrayed all those years before. And yet, when Joseph finds himself in a position to exact revenge upon his brothers, he doesn't do it. Instead, he forgives them. (*Aside: Yes, I know that he "messed" with them a little bit to teach them a lesson, but he caused them no real harm*).

Joseph forgave his brothers and promised to provide for their families. "And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So 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" (Gen. 45:7-8a, ESV).² He wept and embracing them, proving his genuine love and mercy (vv. 14-15). He repeatedly told them not to be afraid (Gen. 50:19, 21).

How in the world did Joseph summon the courage to have mercy on such scoundrels as his brothers? How do we? Only through the mercy and love of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). And we forgive because God first forgave us. On the cross Jesus prayed for his enemies—prayed for us—and pleaded, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). He had mercy on us, though we do not deserve it. He forgave us and remained faithful even though we are faithless.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Now we are called to do the same for others. In our epistle, the Apostle Paul writes, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:31-32). We are called to forgive others as God in Christ forgave us. How did God forgive us? Fully, freely, and unconditionally. We don’t deserve it. We couldn’t win it, earn it, or buy it. But he gave it to us all by his grace as a gift (cf. Eph. 2:8-9). Now we forgive our brothers and sisters.

For isn’t that what we say when we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us?” Those are very dangerous words. When we ask God to forgive us *as we forgive* others, that means we’re asking God to forgive us *in the same exact way* that we forgive others. God help us if we do not demonstrate the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ in our own relationships! And, if we ask for his help, he will.

“Father God, help me to love this person! Help me to forgive them. Show me that their sin is no greater and no worse than mine. For we all daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. And yet, in your mercy, you sent your Son Jesus to die for me and to forgive my sins. Amen.”

David Peter writes about a pre-school aged child who had trouble saying the Lord’s Prayer out loud:

“She recited the words as she heard them, but they weren’t quite accurate to the original text. Yet her rendition captured a significant truth. She said: ‘Forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets.’

“Indeed, even in the church there are others who put trash in our baskets. They deliver the corrupting talk of bitterness, anger, clamor, slander and malice. Paul tells us to put that all away. We are to take out the trash. We do so by forgiving. We don’t let the trash putrefy in our heads and hearts. We release to God the wrongs done to us and the slander spoken against us. We forgive. We forgive because we

have been forgiven. We have been forgiven of the trash in our baskets that stank to high heaven but was removed by the passion of Christ. “Forgive us our trash baskets,” we cry to God in this season of Lent. And in view of his mercy in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. In the power of his mercy and grace, we now forgive those who put trash in our baskets.”³

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³ David Peter, *In View of God's Mercy* (Fenton: Creative Communications for the Parish, 2022), 135.