

## Free to Forgive / Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35

These two texts are the Old Testament reading and the gospel reading for Proper 19 (Three-Year Lectionary: Series A in LSB). In Genesis 50, Joseph, the Hebrew prime minister of Egypt had every justified reason to get even with his brothers. Or, it is a wonderful opportunity. You remember the story. Right? The brothers dumped Joseph in a pit, sold him to slave traders and told their father he had been attacked and viciously mauled by wild animals. Joseph ended up in Egypt. In classic rags to riches fashion, he goes from Pharaoh's prison to being in charge of Pharaoh's federal grain elevators, barns and silos – the essential food supply of all of Egypt. When famine hit the land of Israel, his brothers came to him hat in hand to buy grain. They did not know they were dealing with brother Joseph. Instead of getting even, Joseph does the unthinkable. He forgives his brothers for their sin against him, takes them in along with the old man patriarch Jacob, and he provides for them.

Then the old man dies. Then the brothers are gravely concerned. They thought payback time had come. With Jacob dead, Joseph would get even with them for what they did. So they invoked the name of their dead father. *“Your father gave this command before he died. Say to Joseph, ‘Forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.’ And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.”*

Joseph broke down in tears when he heard this. He could have exploited this for his own advantage. He could have evened the score. Instead, he uses the “f” word! He FORGIVES them. *“Do not fear,”* he said, *“for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”* They meant to do evil. They wanted to murder their brother. Instead, they sold him into slavery. They bald-faced lied to their father. God used it for good. He saved the sons of Israel from starvation and death through Joseph.

In this Old Testament history Joseph is not only small “s” savior of his brothers, but he is also a picture of the capital “S” Savior Jesus by whose death comes life, by whose blood comes forgiveness, by whose cross comes salvation. *“Crucify him! Crucify him!”* It was all meant for evil. An innocent Man going to the most cruel of capital punishments. Executed brutally by crucifixion! It is hard to conceive of greater evil done against someone. God meant it for good. The salvation of the world. Your salvation and mine. *“In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself not counting their trespasses against them,”* (2 Cor 5:19).

Now, some more about forgiveness. Peter comes to Jesus. Has a question. He had heard Jesus' teaching on forgiveness and prayer. For example: *“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”* (Mt 6:12) *“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.”* (Mt. 6:14-15)

Peter is wondering, just like all of us regarding forgiveness and forgiving: *“How often? When is enough enough? How often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?”* No doubt Peter remembered what he learned from the rabbis in synagogue school. They said three times. Three times you were obligated to forgive. That's quite generous. But not a fourth! Peter, to use Poker

language, calls their bluff and raises it to the next biblical “lucky number” – from three to seven! Surely seven times was enough. That is extremely munificent! Who could ask for more than that?

Jesus doesn't agree. “Not seven times. I'll see our seven and raise you seventy-seven times!” The point: If you're doing the math, keeping score and doing bookwork, you're not forgiving. “Love keeps no record of wrongs.” That's what the blessed apostle Paul taught. 1 Corinthians 13:1. Remember?

Now, in order to clinch what He just said, Jesus preaches a parabolic sermon. He connects it to the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer. ***“Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors.”*** In that petition Jesus wants His disciples to pray for forgiveness in the same way as we forgive.

Jesus begins the parable this way. The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wants to settle accounts with his servants. A bookkeeping king! A king who does math. Scores. And lo and behold there is a servant who owes an incredibly shocking sum of cash to the king. This debt is more than he can possibly pay back even if he had hundreds of careers and worked for 10,000 years! Maybe it is like the Illinois, California, and Michigan state debts all together or better yet like the national debt.

The servant begs for mercy. ***“Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.”*** Yeah. Right. Like that can be done. Then the sermon takes an incredibly surprising twist. What no one would ever expect. The sovereign is merciful. His eminence DIES TO THE BOOKKEEPING! He wipes away, that is to say, he FORGIVES the entire debt! Clears the books. And what does this forgiven servant go out and do? He finds a fellow servant who owes him a couple hundred bucks, begins to choke him and demands payment in full at once. No mercy. No forgiveness. Word gets back to the king about this event. He is peeved to say the least. PDQ he subpoenas the forgiven servant and damns him to prison until his debt is paid in full. ***“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”***

***“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”*** Think about that the next time you pray the Lord's Prayer. Forgive us Father in the same way that we forgive. Deal with us Father as we deal with one another.

***“If you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”*** Take note. Jesus says this about the heart. Does Jesus mean emotions and feelings here? No. It is about your will. Forgiveness is an intentional act. From the heart. The heart is the place where sin has had its way. From the sin-infected heart proceed all sorts of sins – murder, theft, adultery, gossip, slander, you name it. If we are going to forgive from the heart, then our hearts must be changed. You and I can't do that. Only God does!

Forgiveness begins not in our hearts but in the merciful heart of God. In the heart that seeks and saves the sinner. In the heart that beats with compassion for the least and the lost. The heart that reaches out to the ungodly and the enemy. The heart of God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish in sin. God's heart desires everyone to turn and live. Jesus prays this way from the heart:

***“Father, forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing,”*** as He cruciformly dies in full view of His enemies and persecutors. The capital “S” Savior sounds just like small “s” savior Joseph: ***“You mean this for evil, but God meant it for good.”***

The source of forgiveness is the Good Friday cross of Jesus by which He pours out divine and saving forgiveness on the entire world. Your forgiveness is nothing else than His forgiveness. Your forgiveness is the overflow of His divine forgiveness that spills over to your neighbor. King of kings and Lord of lords Jesus has wiped away all your unrepayable debt. The law with all of its demands, threats and punishments has been fulfilled. It is paid in full by Jesus your brother. You are forgiven!

I hear people say to me all the time: *“I can’t forgive.”* I have a sneaky suspicion that they are not telling the truth. What they are most likely saying is this: *“I won’t forgive.”* That hellacious! So learn today that forgiveness means letting go. It means releasing. Leaving something be. Which is easier? To hang on to something or to drop it? Imagine a 55 pound weight from the fitness center. Which is easier. To hold on to it and carry it around or to drop it? So don’t ever say, *“I can’t forgive.”* Admit the truth. Confess the truth. Repent of really saying “I won’t forgive” because that will end hellishly.

***“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”***

What are the sins that have been committed against you? Some, no doubt, are quite horrific. And the consequences of such sin probably had enormous negative consequences in your life. Did you go for revenge? Pay back? Even the score. Did any of it change your heart? Did getting your pound of flesh from those who sinned against you change who you are? Did it make you feel more secure? Are you more free?

***“You meant it for evil; God meant it for good.”***

It’s time for all of to believe this. To believe that God can and does work good out of evil. Not that He trumps evil with good but that He works good in, with and under evil. We like to quote Romans 8 all the time. ***“God works all things together for good to those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose.”*** We like to quote that as comfort to others to assure them that God will work good somehow. But do we hear what this is saying? That God works all things together for good – ALL THINGS. Good things, bad things, ugly things. Evil. The tornado that destroys your home. The drunk driver that slams into your child’s car. The terrorist who attacks your country. The person who sins against you, hurts you and purposely wants to harm you.

Now back to Jesus’ parable. It’s intentionally absurd. No one but the federal government could amass such debt as the first servant. But the point is in the comparison. How small the second debt is by comparison. How small the sins against you are compared with your sins before God. And yet we act as though our sin is nothing compared with the sins of others against us. That’s why we need to come back to the source, again and again. We need to confess the truth of what we are –

poor, miserable sinners. We need to hear that word of forgiveness drummed into our ears yet again before we got out into that forgiveness-starved world.

I tell all the couples preparing to get married that there are three words that are crucial to their marriage. Three words they must say to each other intentionally, whether they feel like it or not. Three words that must be said and heard frequently. "I forgive you." They always think it's "I love you." And those are important words too. But without forgiveness there will be no love. ***"Love keeps no record of wrong."***

The servant who was forgiven much could have been a reflection of the King and his mercy. He could have tracked down his fellow servant, the one who owed him, and forgive his debt. And in so doing, he would have enjoyed a big glass of the outrageous freedom of forgiveness. Letting go is liberating. God in Christ has let go of your debt, your sin. He let go of it. He dropped dead to it. Instead of reforming you and rehabilitating you, He simply forgives you. You are free.

Forgiveness is an act of freedom. The prison doors have been thrown wide open. You are free to walk out of that tiny little cell as free men and women in Christ. The books have been wiped clean. ***"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."*** (Rom 8:1) Freedom. You are free to step out into this glorious land of liberty, the kingdom of heaven. But remember, this is a free kingdom. And the Divine King is a bit crazy and has this outrageous tendency to forgive. And so you live in His freedom and the freedom of His forgiveness by forgiving others.

Finally, let me ask you this question. Who suffers when you refuse to forgive? The person who has sinned against you? Or you? Who is imprisoned? Who's actions and feelings are held captive? You? Or the person who sinned against you? To refuse to forgive is to go back to the penitentiary just like the forgiven servant who tragically wound up back in prison. The kingdom of heaven is about free people forgiving freely for Jesus' sake.

***"You meant it for evil; God meant it for good."***

That's faith talk on the part of Joseph. That's how a free man in Christ deals with his brothers who sinned against him. And you are that free man and woman in Christ! After all, for freedom Christ has set you free.

Happy forgiving freely and ridiculously.