

“Forgiving in God’s Kingdom”

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Scripture: Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35

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How many of you have ever carried a grudge? It’s okay...you can admit it. There’s no reason to feel shy about this. We can all imagine how exasperated Peter must have felt at Jesus’ answer. “Seventy times seven!?! That’s impossible!” Peter thought he was being generous when he offered seven. I suspect not many of us would go even that far would we?

In fact, for some of us the idea of forgiving at all might feel a little distasteful. There is something about nursing a grudge that is very attractive. Holding onto righteous anger over wrongs can make us feel powerful. It’s no wonder that Joseph’s brothers were cringing when they went to him for help. After what they had done to him, and knowing their own unforgiving natures, they had little hope that he would offer them anything but hostility. And his forgiveness of them marks a turning point in the history of Israel. Joseph somehow is able to see his life in the broad sweep of God’s activity, not just on his behalf but on behalf of his whole family, the very ones who had wronged him in the first place.

Now that’s a unique story of forgiveness. It’s one that illustrates God’s engagement in the life of God’s people very clearly. The evidence for Joseph of what God was up to all along is irrefutable. But for most of us that activity isn’t nearly as clear. When we are betrayed in a way that sets off a downward spiral in our lives, it can be very hard to look back at it and think, “Well, this was all for the best.”

More often we’re left feeling hurt and bitter and resentful. We rehearse over and over in our heads what we’ll say or do to get back at them. We imagine all sorts of disasters falling on them. And we wallow in our righteous anger, sometimes even long after the person at its source has vanished from our lives. In his book *A Pretty Good Person*, Christian philosopher Lewis Smedes writes: “Why do we hang on to it? For one reason, nothing on earth makes us feel more virtuous than remembered wrongs. Or gives us such perverse pleasure....Hate is the soul’s cocaine; it gives us a sweet high, but sooner or later it brings us low.”

Peter was asking for what we all would like. He was seeking permission to hate. In effect he asks, “When may I stop loving this person who has wronged me?” And Jesus’ answer is, “Never.” There is freedom in Christ, but freedom to hate is not granted.

This past week we observed the seventh anniversary of the attacks of September 11, 2001. I’ll never forget the anger and desire for revenge that took hold of so many in our country seven years ago. For some that anger continues to eat away at them. I remember seeing at the time a sign someone had posted somewhere in the country, along, I think a presidential motorcade route that read: “President Bush: Bomb Someone!”

The desire to lash out was palpable. And here we are, seven years later, mired deeply in two wars we don't really know how to end. Now I don't know if it makes sense to apply Jesus' teaching to national policy, but if his description of forgiveness in God's kingdom is to mean anything for us, then surely it has something to tell about our response to those attacks.

But that may be too tall an order. Before we can begin to experience forgiveness as a nation, we probably need to experience forgiveness within our own lives. What's happening in Afghanistan and Iraq is sort of a national embodiment of what is happening in our own spirits when we refuse to forgive. A battle ensues and its impact on our lives is devastating. We become prisoners of our own memories.

Our only escape, as Jesus knows, is forgiveness. His words at the very end of his parable sound awfully harsh, don't they? "And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." I don't believe Jesus is threatening eternal torment from God so much as describing the torment our spirits endure when we refuse to forgive. God isn't the cause of that torment, but without our cooperation, God may be powerless to end it.

The road to ending that torture, the torment that perhaps Peter was struggling with, or maybe even Joseph, begins with forgiveness. Again, Lewis Smedes puts it well: "When we forgive an ancient wrong, we set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner we set free is us. When we forgive we dance again to the melody of healing. When we forgive we reclaim control of our lives from the slavery of a hurting memory."

I think Smedes is right. I think he understands what Jesus is getting at with this parable. But I'm also inclined to believe that it works the other as well. Not only do we need to forgive for the well-being of our spirits, but we also need to accept forgiveness. It could be that one hurdle blocking our ability to forgive is our inability to feel forgiven. It's hard to trust the limitless forgiveness of God's kingdom that Jesus describes when we aren't able to forgive ourselves.

Letting go of the guilt we carry, letting go of the hostility that chokes our spirits is the beginning of healing. To help us do that, God has moved toward us in Christ. As Paul writes in Romans, "The proof of God's amazing love is this: while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Forgiveness in God's kingdom is so vast, so all-encompassing that it doesn't depend upon us to ask for it. It's there for the taking. It's available much like this meal is available. We don't work for this, we can't begin to deserve it, all we can do is receive it, gratefully, joyfully.

You are forgiven. You can let go of whatever it is that holds you prisoner, whatever it is that torments your spirit. Let go and receive God's forgiveness; let go of your righteous anger and forgive, and let God set your spirit free.

Amen