

Pentecost 15, September 13, 2020 (Mt 18:21-35; Gen 50:15-21; Ps 103)

You remember Peter. Peter the Impulsive, Peter the Determined. Peter, who always seems so sure of his righteousness, he never fears to speak his mind.

Today Peter asks Jesus how often he has to forgive another member of the church. Obviously, he believes *seven* times is really a lot. He's probably thinking Jesus'll say something like, "How generous you are to be so forgiving!" Can you imagine his shock at Jesus' reply? **Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.** (Sometimes also translated 70 x 7)

Peter wants to understand forgiveness in concrete, reasonable terms, what one writer calls, "a specific number of difficult mercies" (S&S, 2008, p. 264). He expects that after he's forgiven the same person seven times, it'll be okay to start planning revenge or retribution.

But Jesus has a different set of values, a scale of *justice balanced by mercy*. In the kingdom of heaven—God's reign on earth during our lifetime—mercy takes on a whole different character.

Jesus ends today's text by warning his disciples: if they don't show mercy to each other as God shows mercy to them, they'll be in trouble. *Big* trouble. God will act in anger *if you don't forgive your brother or sister from your heart.* -- **Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.**

Peter wants a quantity of forgiveness. Jesus demands a quality of mercy. Forgiveness and mercy are Christ-like qualities. *God*-like qualities, lifted up in scripture from the very beginning.

In the first reading today, we hear a powerful word of forgiveness from Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob—the one who wore the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat or, in a more accurate translation, a coat with long sleeves.

Do you remember his story? As a child, Joseph was sold into slavery by his ten older brothers. First they wanted to kill him, but then they realized they could make a profit by selling him as a slave to a trading caravan. In the end, their jealousy of this younger brother provided life-saving rationing to all the nations of the Middle East. Read the story in Genesis, beginning with chapter 37!

Many years after the treachery, Joseph was reunited with his brothers by the famine. He rejoiced to see them, but they feared his anger and revenge. In today's text they express their fear once again, after their father Jacob's death.

Listen to Joseph's words of forgiveness, even after the brutal wrong they'd done to him: **Don't be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.**

That's forgiveness on a grand scale--the same kind of forgiveness and mercy Jesus is commanding for the disciples, within their family of faith. Forgiveness from the heart. **–Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.**

Some of you know that following the murder of George Floyd in May, I made a commitment to learn more about the history behind **Black Lives Matter**. I've read over a dozen books on black history: autobiographies, biographies, an in-depth historical novel, and now I'm working my way through a seriously heavy historical book, a "Brief" study of Reconstruction during and following the Civil War.

The most important thing I've learned is how woefully ignorant I was about the history of blacks in the United States, beginning in 1619. The second most important thing I've learned is that in many ways, little has changed for many African Americans. Time after time I've read of events that could have occurred any time since 1720: police brutality to black men; prejudice and hatred on the part of whites towards blacks; lack of opportunity—equal or not—for our black brothers and sisters in the fields of education, employment, finances, housing, medical care, protection under the law.

I didn't understand the concept of *white supremacy* at all until I began this reading. I didn't understand what "racial prejudice" meant until I learned that many—or most?—whites actually considered blacks to be sub-human, less than human, and therefore not worthy of any sort of care or compassion. They were completely discounted, even *hated*, just for having skin of a different color.

It's often hard for us to forgive even once. We live in a culture that celebrates rights and privileges without comparable responsibilities. But what happens when a great sin, a huge trespass, is committed against a whole race of people? Can we expect them to forgive—or even overlook—especially when things don't seem to be getting better? Can we forgive their fury, their rage, against us?

Nowhere does Jesus say it's okay not to forgive. I repeat, *nowhere does Jesus say it's okay **not to forgive***. How many different ways have we heard it? *Vengeance is mine, says the Lord. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemy, and pray for those who persecute you; bless them, and do not curse them.*

Love one another as I have loved you. Judge not, and you will not be judged. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the peacemakers. And the words we say in the Creed: **He will come again to judge the living and the dead.**

Nineteen years ago a horrendous sin was committed against this nation. For nineteen years we've sought revenge. We've tried to defend and protect ourselves and our country in many and various ways. Both nationally and internationally, the United States has struggled to hold itself together as "one nation under God."

To save the world, God himself died on the cross. When we stand before the throne of grace, he won't ask us how well we defended ourselves, how quick we were to point out the sins and failings of others and take revenge for their insults and offenses.

Instead, God will ask us: *did you love the foreigner and the stranger? Did you forgive? Did you encourage? Did you help others become holy? Did you serve the one Lord, through the one baptism, in the one faith?*

Thank God for the power of baptism! Thank God for all his goodness and mercy! Because Jesus lives, we too can live, called and led by the Holy Spirit, loved into wholeness within this body of Christ at St. John/St. Stephen, where we worship and praise the Lord. *Together* we are the Church, the body of Christ, at work in the world for blessing! Thanks be to God!