

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Year A  
Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY  
Genesis 50:15-21  
Pastor Paul Horn

September 7, 2008

### Forgive as Christ Forgave You

*<sup>15</sup> When Joseph's brothers saw that their father [Jacob] was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?"*

*<sup>16</sup> So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: <sup>17</sup> 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.*

*<sup>18</sup> His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.*

*<sup>19</sup> But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. <sup>21</sup> So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.*

Which is easier to say, "I was wrong and I'm sorry," or "I forgive you,"? We will examine both sides of that coin in the story this morning. Let's first look at Joseph's brothers. In vs17 they say to Joseph, "**Forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.**" Treated so badly? That's an understatement. What they did to their brother was appalling. We rewind the calendar 39 years. Joseph is a snot-nosed 17 year-old punk. The second youngest of twelve, he is daddy's favorite and he, along with everyone else in the family, knows it. One day Jacob presents his VIP son with an expensive robe, the Bible tells us it was woven with many expensive colors.. Because he is the favored son, Joseph doesn't mind tattling on his brothers when they get themselves into mischief while herding the family flocks far away from the homestead. In his naivety he even goes so far as to share last night's dream with his brothers, "The twelve of us were gathering grain in the field. My bundle of grain stood up and your sheaves of grain bowed down to mine. In the next dream, the sun, moon and eleven stars all bowed down to me." As if they and their father and mother would bow down to little Joseph... How arrogant! After hearing these dreams the sons of Jacob had been pushed to the limit. They had gone from a mild jealousy to a raging hatred of their little teenage brother.

Shortly after these events, Jacob sends his beloved offspring to check in on the other sons, who were tending the family flocks about 35 miles away. The brothers saw him, flowing robe and all, as he approached the field. "Here comes the 'dream expert,'" they said, "Let's kill him!" But the oldest, Reuben, must have felt some responsibility and tried to spare Joseph's life, "No! There will be no shedding of blood. Throw him in this empty water pit and we'll figure out what to do later." Joseph walks up to his brothers, "Hey guys, what's going on?" With fists clenched and teeth grinding they seize him, tear off his precious robe and throw him into the empty cistern. Reuben leaves the group in

the hopes of returning, pulling Joseph out and returning him back to father Jacob. It doesn't bother the brothers at all to sit down around the hole in the ground where their brother is no doubt crying for help and eat lunch. One of them spots a caravan approaching, merchants on their way to Egypt. Judah, the fourth oldest suggests, "Our older brother is right. What will we gain if we kill Joseph? Let's sell him instead." The others all agree. They sell their own flesh and blood as a slave, at the lowest slave price, 20 shekels of silver (8oz). Reuben returns only to find the pit empty, no Joseph. "You did what? What will I do now?" The brothers devise a plan. They take Joseph's pretty boy robe, tear it to pieces and dip it in goat's blood. They take the robe back to their father Jacob and say, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe." Notice they did not say *our brother's robe*, but *your son's robe*. Jealousy turns to anger and hatred and then into kidnapping, abandonment and deception. Yes, they treated their brother poorly.

The sons of Jacob age 39 years. They cannot put out of their minds what they had done. Their father continued to grieve his son's "death" and refused to be comforted, everyday for 39 years. You can imagine the sleepless nights, the silence at the dinner table, the sorrowed glances among each other, none volunteering to share the truth, and always wondering, "What happened to our brother?" After 39 years the brothers receive the answer to the question they had been asking for so long. They find themselves standing in the court of the second-highest ranking official in Egypt: their brother Joseph.

From the words in our lesson we know the brothers were certain Joseph would pay them back for what they had done to him. Now that their father Jacob was dead, there was no reason not to. He had every right to do so. He certainly had the power to do it. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't you make certain that your brothers suffer for what happened? Joseph's actions surprise us, don't they? He weeps when he hears his brothers' plea for forgiveness. Perhaps he imagined the burden of guilt that overwhelmed them. Perhaps he regretted his failure to reassure them sooner that he had sincerely forgiven them. Joseph weeps. Then he reassures his brothers, "Don't be afraid. What's done is done. I am not in the place of God. He alone has the right to take revenge. Even though what happened to me was terrible, the LORD used my life situation to save many lives." While in Egypt the LORD used Joseph to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, through which the LORD revealed that there seven years of plentiful harvest would be followed by seven years of severe famine. Pharaoh promoted Joseph to second in command of Egypt. When the famine struck, Joseph sold the stored grain to the people, saving many lives, and now, including the lives of his immediate family.

Joseph's actions surprise us, because each of us has been wronged by someone and when we look at the "little incidents" in our lives and how we have overreacted, it's embarrassing. Each of us has had "that" encounter while shopping. An employee is very rude to us and we blow up at them, "How dare they treat me this way! I'm the customer!" Each of us has had that encounter on 31W with the tailgater or Mr. I-don't-need-to-use-my-turn-signal-when-I-change-lanes. We blow up, "How dare you drive like that!" along with a few other choice words that express our displeasure. Each of us has been offended by something someone else said or did. We respond, again, by retaliating,

“I can’t believe they would say that to me! I’m just going to ignore them and if they try to talk to me again well, I’ll make it obvious that I don’t want to! I can’t wait to tell so-and-so what they said!” Maybe you are like Joseph, and you’ve had your own flesh and blood hurt you and the only thing on your mind was, “How can I repay them for what they’ve done to me?” Tempers flare, angry words gush from our lips, grudges are nursed and fed.

Because of the world we live in we assume this is the norm. Consider these movie titles, “*Payback; Revenge of the Sith; V for Vendetta.*” Think about the video games you play or the soap operas you watch; everyone is out to get everyone back for what they did. That’s the way the world sees it; it’s payback time. Sue them for all they’re worth. You deserve an apology. You have a right to be angry. Do you? Do you have a right to do these things?

I think the more important question is, “If I have the right, doesn’t God then also have the right?” He is the Just and Divine God who in his infinite wisdom established the standards of living for all human beings. From our lessons this morning we heard specific commands, “**Do not be angry. Do not let unwholesome talk come out of your mouths. Forgive each other from the heart. Get rid of all bitterness and rage. Be kind and compassionate to one another.**” We can blame it on our temperament, “That’s just how I am, I can’t help it.” But there are no excuses when it comes to God’s laws. Either we have obeyed them perfectly or we have fallen severely short. God is the only one who has a right to hold a grudge against you and me for all eternity and let loose the full force of his wrath on us because we do not obey his commandments.

But God’s actions surprise us. Consider his Son, Jesus. His own countrymen rejected him. His friends abandoned him. A close friend betrayed him. The people he came to save hurled insults at him. And when soldiers were driving spikes through his hands, he cried out, “Father, forgive them!” Jesus said those words for the Pharisees and chief priests, for his disciples, for Judas, for his people, and for you and me. Because Jesus did all that, the Father forgives us...again and again and again. He chooses to forget how terribly we have broken his commands. In Jeremiah 31:34 he says, “**I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.**” That boggles our minds. How could the omniscient God, who knows everything, even our thoughts, delete from his memory all our harsh words and thoughts of revenge? What is impossible for us to do is possible with God. He does it. How could God, who promises to punish those who do not obey him, no longer hold that threat of punishment over our heads? He held the punishment on his Son’s head. St. Peter writes, “**He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.**” (2:24) It is because Christ Jesus took your punishment in his body that God the Father can say through your pastor, “I forgive you all your sins.”

I cannot imagine what thoughts must have been swirling in the minds of Joseph’s brothers. “Does he really mean it?” We read that Joseph reassured his brothers. You never have to wonder, “Has God truly forgiven my sins? Is he still angry with me?” You Lord reassures you and speaks kindly to you again and again. This past week in your

Meditations devotion book you read how the LORD comforts the afflicted. Every time you spend personal time with God's Word, he reassures you, "Yes, my dear child, you are forgiven!" By eating and drinking Christ's body and blood with the bread and wine Jesus promises you, "This was shed and offered on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins." Every time you see this baptismal font you are reminded that the Holy Spirit cleansed you of your sins by washing you with water and the Word. Ahhh....a sigh of relief comes over us every time we walk away from this altar, every Sunday we walk out those doors, every day we close our Bible after reading it, because there God reassures, "You are forgiven."

God's actions surprise us, because we surely do not deserve it, and yet he does so for that exact reason. Now, forgiven, your actions will surprise others when you respond as Joseph did to his brothers. Last year on an early Sunday morning, Pastor Jon Schroeder walked up to the door of Faith Lutheran Church in Sharpsburg, GA only to discover that someone had already opened the door for him, with their foot. Thousands of dollars worth of computers and electronics were gone, filing cabinets had been pried open, and the thief left a big mess. What goes through the mind of a pastor? "We have worship in a couple of hours. How are going to sort this all out, clean it all up? Why would someone do this?" The church service began that morning at the normal time. While the police were conducting their investigation in the offices and fellowship hall, they overheard the prayer section of the service. They heard Pastor Schroeder praying for the thief, that God would lead him to repentance, and that the Lord would forgive him of his sins. Since you have been forgiven, this will be your attitude. When you are offended, when someone is rude to you, when your own flesh and blood abandon you, you will forgive. You will respond as Jesus did, "Father, forgive them." You will reassure those who have sinned against you and speak kindly to them so they will not have any doubt that you are sincere in your mercy and of the Father's mercy to them.

I cannot imagine being Rueben, Judah or one of the other brothers, shaking in terror while bowing down to my brother and pleading for forgiveness. But I do know what it's like to bow down before my God, shaking in terror, asking for forgiveness of my sins. I cannot imagine being Joseph and forgiving his brothers for the awful things they had done to him. I cannot imagine my Lord and Savior freely pardoning me for all the awful things I do against him. But I experience that free forgiveness every day of my life and every time I come to church. Since Jesus Christ has had mercy on me, I will show mercy and I will forgive those who sin against me. I sincerely pray that the Holy Spirit will move you to do the same this week. Amen.