

Bible Study: Pentecost 15 (A) - September 13, 2020

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Genesis 50:15-21

This week's passage reads like an epilogue to the Joseph story, almost an afterthought. Many years after selling their brother Joseph into slavery, the sons of Jacob have been reunited with Joseph and saved from starvation because of his position of power in Egypt. Their father Jacob has blessed his sons and died and a grand procession comprising both Egyptians and Jacob's family have traveled to Canaan to bury Jacob there. Joseph and his brothers have returned to Egypt to live a life of privilege; surely all the drama of the Jacob cycle should be over.

If the brothers' perception of Joseph has not changed, their posture toward him has not changed, either. They are still liars and manipulators themselves. They play on his deep love for his father, knowing that as the one who is wronged, Joseph also has the interpersonal power, the power to forgive. Joseph's power -- the personal and the political -- combine when Joseph makes his theological proclamation: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today" (Genesis 50:20). Joseph sees the ways his own personal story and that of his family are wrapped up in the stories of God's relationship with Israel.

Just as the one who is wronged has the power to forgive, the one wronged also has the power to make this kind of theological proclamation. If a sufferer sees divine purposefulness in her or his suffering, we can affirm or at least hear out that declaration.

- How do we see that while God does not cause things to happen, He does use things for our good and the good of all?
- When we are injured how hard is it to forgive those who have injured us?

Psalm 103:1-13

The singer of Psalm 103 calls on others to "Bless the LORD" because the words of Exodus 34:6, found numerous times in the book of Psalms and in the Prophets, are an integral part of the psalmist's understanding of the nature of Yahweh God.

In verses 9-10 and 12, the psalm singer celebrates God's mercy and graciousness toward our sins, iniquities, and transgressions, the same words used in Exodus 34:7

("forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin"). God will not "accuse" or "keep his anger" and will not "deal with us nor repay us" according to our "sins" or "iniquities," and God will "remove" our "transgressions." The word translated in verse 10 as "sin," is from the root word *hata* ', which literally means "to miss the mark."

- How do we feel when we know we have "missed the mark" and then are forgiven?
- Do we declare "Bless the Lord, O my soul"?

Romans 14:1-12

When Paul is writing the letter to the Christians in Rome, he is writing to a divided community: the Jewish Christians who were exiled from Rome and have since returned, versus the gentile Christians who had populated Rome in their absence. If this fledgling church was to survive, they would need to find a way past their differences, yet they struggle as if they were adversaries. Both the Jewish and gentile converts distrust and think themselves superior to the other, which sows disunity all around.

If there is one message Paul wants them to take to heart, it is that they are all the same in the only way that matters: They are God's beloved, for whom Christ died so that they may live forever. None of their differences compares to their one, essential similarity.

We, too, are faced with people all around us who seem different. We all have different values and can use those to judge ourselves superior to others, but God has already judged us all and found us all worthy of love, compassion and salvation. Let us not focus too much on how our differences stack up against each other, and instead turn our focus toward the God who sees us and loves us all the same.

- What differences with others do you find you have a hard time overcoming?
- In what ways do you see judgment and disunity getting in the way of the work of the church?

Matthew 18:21-35

Any community needs to determine how it is going to handle judgment and justice. This parable about the two debtors is often used as an illustration about fairness, saying that the first slave should have treated the second slave as he himself had been treated. After all, the debt his lord had forgiven was more than 500,000 times as much money as the other slave owed him (see Coogan's "New Oxford Annotated Bible, Third Edition," Oxford Press, 2007), so the first slave's behavior was hardly fair! This parable, however, is less about fairness than about how, fundamentally, Jesus values forgiveness.

Jesus precedes this parable by highlighting that forgiveness should be an overabundant principle. We should not even be thinking in terms of how much we should forgive; we should just forgive. We, like Peter, are being told that forgiving others – and forgiving ourselves – is never the wrong answer. The lowliest person is still worthy of forgiveness. The gravest transgression should still be forgiven. The most righteous and powerful people still need to forgive. Think of what a radical statement it would be for a society to say that their guiding principle is forgiveness!

If God has already forgiven Christ's crucifixion, we should think carefully about what we are telling God and each other if we declare something unforgivable. We can have justice without losing sight of compassion, and righteousness without losing sight of forgiveness.

- When have you struggled with forgiving someone?
- When have you struggled with forgiving yourself?