

Fifteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A)
Genesis 50:15-21; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35
September 12-13, 2020
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ
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This weekend marks the 6 month anniversary of declaring COVID-19 a national emergency. These last 6 months have brought monumental changes to us and our family and friends, each of us impacted in unique ways that left us maybe isolated and lonely; unemployed and broke; employed but overwhelmed; bereft of visits with our parents, our kids, or grandkids; or, for some, confined to the house with spouse and kids. So many scenarios and most of them involved BIG adjustments, something not many of us are very good at.

So, raise your hand if you've felt angry, anxious, bored, cranky, crazy, depressed, drained, exhausted, fed up, flummoxed, frustrated, stressed or worried. Did I miss anybody? Is it any surprise that the US divorce rate has skyrocketed amid the pandemic (as reported by the NY Post two weeks ago)?

Forgiving one another is probably the hardest thing that Jesus ever asks of us, even during good times. Now, we're all running around angry, drained, fed up, frustrated, and short tempered...who feels like being forgiving?

In today's Gospel, Peter asks Jesus how many times we have to forgive someone. 7 is an easy number. We can all count to 7 so that would make it pretty easy to keep track. Peter knew that Jewish law only required forgiving a person 3 times, so Peter is being extravagant offering up 7 times. But Jesus is having none of it. He says, "77 times", or some translations say "70 times 7". Either way, the point is we're not supposed to keep track. God certainly doesn't keep track of our sins, thank goodness. God erases them like they never happened. In the book of Isaiah, the Lord says "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow." In the book of Hebrews, God makes a new covenant, which says, in part, "For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." "Poof! Clean slate. It's complete; it's final, at least as far as God is concerned. On the other hand, we may have an old guilt that haunts us, something bad we did a long time ago that bubbles up to the surface every now and then that still fills us with shame.

And that's exactly what's happening in the first reading from Genesis. Joseph's 10 older brothers ganged up on him when he was just a kid. They hated him because he was his father's favorite. They were going to kill him, but ended up selling him as a slave and lying to their father, telling him that poor Joseph was fatally attacked by wild animals. It's a very long story, from Genesis Chapter 37-50, but it's a juicy tale, a real page-turner, with lots of twists and turns, and eventually, these bad boys get their comeuppance when famine forces them to travel to Egypt to come before Joseph, who, in the interim has miraculously become pharaoh's right hand man in charge of food distribution and lots of other things. They beg their brother for food.

I dare say that Joseph was far more forgiving than I would have been. He not only feeds them, but he eventually sets up the whole family, about 33 of them on some prime real estate, where they live off the fat of the land. Many years pass and Joseph and his brothers are all grandfathers by now and that's where today's reading picks up, following the death of their father. Now that dad is dead, the 10 brothers are scared out of their wits that Joseph will now finally take his revenge. Their old guilt is haunting them big time! So, what do they do? They tell another lie that on his deathbed, dad's last words were to beg forgiveness from Joseph. They throw themselves down and offer to be his slaves. The story ends with Joseph saying to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 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. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.'

Nice example, Joseph, but you set the bar awfully high! Maybe we might have told our bad brothers, "I forgive you, but I can't forget you wanted to kill me! You sold me as a slave." Or, in other words, "I'm filing this one away until the time is right for me to bring it up again." This is not forgiveness.

Or, we might have said to ourselves, "Just let it go. They're not even worth it. Holding a grudge will only give me ulcers and give me high blood pressure." This isn't forgiveness either. This is letting go of someone, instead of letting go of the sin.

Or we might have remembered that old quote "Always forgive your enemies, - nothing annoys them so much." (Oscar Wilde). That's a way to get back at them, but it isn't forgiveness.

Forgiveness is what God does for us, given to us when Jesus shed his blood, so that God will remember our sins no more. God is not just the forgiver. God makes it possible for us to forgive each other.

Forgiveness is rarely instant. Sometimes someone wounds us so very deeply that forgiveness seems impossible.

Like what about the family member or friend who breaks our heart, breaks our spirit, or otherwise breaks a relationship based on trust. Or worse yet, does it to one of our kids? Forgiveness is rarely on our radar screen. That's when we're most tempted to take matters into our own hands. That's when we're tempted to inflict our own brand of punishment: maybe verbally abusing them or just the opposite, give them the "silent treatment" ...for years. If it's a relationship of trust, we probably know which buttons to push that will cause the most damage to them.

When we cross over that line and seek vengeance, we are sending a message to God that says, "I'll take care of this one, God. I know just what buttons to push, and you might not, or you might not push those buttons as fast as I can." That's how we end up on the wrong side of the line, the side without healing of our wound. The deeper our wound, the more we need to lap up that warm milk of His healing grace. Once we cross the line, that opportunity is gone, and the hurt doesn't heal. It stays and stays. Some people hurt for years. They make themselves emotionally unavailable to guard against more hurt. Some look for opportunities to push the old buttons again to maintain one-upsmanship in the "Hurting Game". Their ongoing hurt is a punishment in itself.

God desires healing and wholeness for each of us and don't ever forget that He not only sees your wound, whether it's a scratch or an old gaping, open wound. He sees it, and He alone can heal it. He alone can help you begin the process of forgiveness. You just have to ask. As I said, it's not instant. Forgiveness is a process, so keep asking Him to help with this. He will, and I speak from experience of some deep wounds of my own, now healed by His amazing grace.

These times of short tempers are creating lots of opportunities for button pushing. Let's give thanks for the God who is able to heal every heart. If somebody dares to push one of your buttons, don't get your underwear in a knot. Don't cross that line. Stay on the side of healing and pray for those on the other side of the line, because God's got some buttons of his own.

It's our faith in the healing power of the Holy Spirit that gives us the courage to risk reaching out again in friendship and love; to risk being emotionally available again for others, so that God can use us to be a blessing to them. Stay with what you know, and you know that there is always healing on only one side of the line.

My prayer for us today is one that you already know by heart. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Amen.