

“Forgive as God Forgives”

Seven times? That was the answer that Peter came up with to his own question, “How many times should I forgive someone?” He thought that seven times was plenty. He thought that seven times was enough. Can you imagine how frustrating it would be to have someone sin against you, ask for forgiveness, and repeat it again for seven times? Seven times was more than double what the rabbis thought. They said to forgive someone three times. You see, Peter had gotten the message that Jesus was trying to drive home. He wanted his followers to forgive others. But Peter didn’t quite understand the full picture. He was looking for a rule. He was looking for a limit. He was trying to find a way to know that he had forgiven someone enough.

You heard how Jesus responded in today’s Gospel (Matthew 18:21-35). He told a story. He taught a truth about forgiveness by telling a parable about a servant who owed his master the king a huge debt, but was forgiven. And then Jesus introduced a twist that seemed almost too incredible to be possible. That same servant went out and found a fellow servant who owed him money. That debt was tiny in comparison to the one the king had already forgiven. Surely the servant could forgive. But he did not. He refused. He demanded that his fellow servant pay everything back. And the king was furious. The servant should have been able to follow the king’s example of forgiveness, but he didn’t.

Jesus’ point is clear. God forgives us of the incredible, unimaginable debt of sin that we owe. And because he does, he asks us to forgive others. Our sermon text, our First Lesson from Genesis 50, shows us another example of forgiveness in action. Joseph’s example shows us how we, too, can forgive as God forgives.

While our text tells us about Joseph forgiving his brothers, it doesn’t tell us much about what needed forgiving. To find that, we have to back up in this account. As Joseph was growing up, he was his father’s favorite out of twelve brothers. He received all sorts of special treatment from his father, which was a recipe for jealousy. The other brothers were so jealous, in fact, that at one point they were ready to kill Joseph. Instead, they stopped short of killing him but sold him into slavery.

Notice that what we’re talking about is truly bad stuff. There is no doubt that what the brothers had done was sinful. Clearly it was offensive to God for them to treat their brother in this way, and it obviously was hurtful toward Joseph. These were real sins committed by the brothers.

And their sins sent Joseph on a tumultuous journey. First, he became a slave in the house of a captain of the guard. Then, by no fault of his own, he was sent to jail and spent years there. Joseph had every right to be upset with his brothers—both for the way that they had treated him and for what had happened to him as a result.

But by the time of our sermon text, everything had changed. The situation had been completely reversed. God had blessed Joseph at every stage of his journey. In jail it was no different. He was highly regarded there and eventually was released to assist the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, himself. Joseph rose to a position of incredible power. He was the second in command of all of Egypt. He helped the nation prepare for and then thrive through a long period of drought and famine. Not only that, but through his work in Egypt, Joseph helped many other nations survive the famine.

And among those survivors from other nations because of the work of Joseph and the blessings of God were Joseph’s own brothers and father. Joseph brought all of them down to Egypt to live. There was food for them in Egypt. Joseph would make sure that they could survive the famine. And they did. They brought their entire families to settle in Egypt and to live there. And some time later, Joseph’s father, Jacob, also called Israel, passed away. His death was what set in motion the events of our text today.

After Jacob was mourned and buried, his sons became worried. They wondered whether their father had been the only factor previously preventing Joseph from seeking revenge. Now that Jacob was gone, would Joseph retaliate? Would he try to get back at them? In hopes of avoiding this, the brothers went to Joseph to beg. They pleaded with him, even invoking their father’s memory, to treat them kindly, to forgive them.

There was no hiding the truth. The brothers knew that they had wronged Joseph. Joseph knew that he had been wronged. What had been done was sinful. They offered themselves to Joseph as his servants because they had nothing else to offer. They had nothing to rely on except Joseph's mercy.

And Joseph wept. He wept because he had forgiven his brothers. He had treated them well by bringing them to Egypt and providing for them. He wasn't waiting for his father to get out of the way before he could finally have his revenge, as they apparently thought he was. He was surprised. He was disappointed that his brothers didn't know this already. He forgave them. He forgave them their real sin.

That's one point we have to understand about forgiving like God forgives. Forgiveness deals with real sin. Sin is an issue. It hurts people. It harms relationships. It offends God. This isn't about a difference of opinion or about a different outlook on things. Sin is a debt that we owe to God and that we owe to each other. And forgiveness is dealing with that debt.

We sometimes forget that about forgiveness. What do you say when someone apologizes to you? Don't we often say, when someone else tells us they're sorry, "That's OK." or "Don't worry about it"? But it is easy for those phrases to avoid sin. We haven't really acknowledged that the person has hurt us and offended God. It is important for us to say, "I forgive you." It is worth acknowledging the real sin and the real hurt in order to really forgive it. That's what God has done for us. He took a pile of sins so massive that they couldn't be counted and heaped it on his sinless Son. He took a debt so insurmountable that we couldn't even imagine paying it off, and he wrote on the bill, "paid in full." We had nothing to offer him. We had nothing to use to curry his favor. All we had was his mercy. And he didn't say, "It's OK. Don't worry about it." He had his own beloved Son make the sacrifice, pay the debt, suffer the consequences so that we wouldn't have to. Sin is real, but so is forgiveness.

And forgiveness is complete. God will never again look to us who have been cleansed in the blood of his Son to pay off our old debt. He will never expect of us an action or activity to make it right. Our sins have been removed as far from us as the east is from the west.

That's just how Joseph treated his brothers. They offered to be his slaves, but he didn't do anything to pay them back for what they had once done. He comforted them and consoled them. He spoke tenderly to them and reassured them. He pointed out how God had used even their sins to accomplish amazing things. God had used Joseph to save many lives, including those of his brothers who carried forward the special promise of a Savior who would be one of their descendants.

Forgive like God forgives. Forgive completely. That's a challenge for people like you and me whose sinful natures would rather hold a grudge or seek revenge. It's a challenge when we want to hang on to ammunition to use for tearing people down when we feel they need it. It's a challenge when we have been seriously hurt by the words and actions of others.

But that's when we really need to look at how God has forgiven us. That's when we need to compare the little lump of sins that our neighbors have committed against us to the towering pile of sins that we have committed against God. That's when we need to remember that our debt was once so great it was impossible to even comprehend, and our neighbor owes us mere pennies in comparison. That's when we take our sinful selfish ways, our grudges, our shortcomings—and see them nailed to the cross with Jesus and taken away forever. And that's when we are renewed to be imitators of God, to follow the example of Christ, and to be kind and compassionate and forgiving to each other.

Seven times? Jesus says, "No, seventy-seven times." His point is not to limit our forgiveness even to that high number. It is to forget about totals and limits. It is to forgive the way that God forgives us. Forgive real sins and forgive them completely.

The Text: Genesis 50:15–21 (NIV84)

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" ¹⁶ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: ¹⁷ '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.

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

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