In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text for this morning’s sermon is the reconciliation scene between Joseph and his brothers. We.read of this in Genesis Chapter 45. It is a favorite story for some of you here at Immanuel. I know that because last year Pastor Caleb and I invited the people of this congregation to propose some of their favorite Bible stories to us for our midweek Lent series. This story of Joseph forgiving his brothers was one of the stories requested. It is a hopeful story and it has a beautiful ending. It goes this way:

14Then he [Joseph] fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept; and Benjamin wept upon his neck. 15And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him. (Genesis 45:14-15, RSV)

This story is going to lead us on to this morning’s Gospel Lesson about forgiveness. In St. Luke chapter 6, Jesus says this:

37Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; (Luke 6:37, RSV)

And so we will be discussing our Lord’s preaching about forgiveness. But before turning to that, let us linger with this story of Joseph forgiving his brothers. I want to stay with this story a bit because it gives us a concrete, human illustration of wrongdoing and of the reconciliation of aggrieved parties. So, let us look at Joseph and his brothers.

By this time in the story everybody is a bit older and a bit wiser. We can see this in the attempt of Joseph’s brothers to protect their younger brother Benjamin and to protect their old father, Jacob. In a way, Jacob is the start of all the misery found in this story. From beginning to end, Jacob is a man who plays favorites with those he loves. He married two wives, Leah and Rachel, but everybody knew that he favored Rachel. He had twelve sons—ten by Leah and two by Rachel—and he favored the two by Rachel. Especially his affection for Joseph was evident. It was in plain sight, with that coat of many colors he gave to Joseph. What had the other sons done wrong that they should be so disfavored? They had been innocent children, created by God and precious to Him. Maybe they were precious to Jacob too. I hope so. But what was evident
to all the brothers when they were young was that the old man liked Joseph best. Jacob seemed not to be very good at hiding his preference for his son Joseph. Maybe he never even tried.

As for Joseph, that young man wore on the nerves of his older brothers by wearing that coat of many colors and by telling them his dreams—dreams in which he seems destined to lord it over his older brothers.

By the time we get to this morning’s Bible story, a lot of water has passed under the bridge. The ten older brothers had gotten so aggravated with Joseph that they had sold the lad into slavery, thereby nearly breaking the heart of their old father. They lied to the old man. They tore up that wretched coat of many colors, and dipped it in animal blood, and gave it to their father. The father concluded exactly what they hoped he would conclude: that some fierce animal had attacked and killed Joseph. At that early stage in the story, the ten older brothers seem willing to break the heart of their father.

But now, in this morning’s story, when they are a bit older and wiser, they are more tender toward their father. They know that he still plays favorites. Now that Joseph is gone, they know that Jacob has transferred his special affection to another son—to the second son born to Rachel, the youngest son, Benjamin. They know that “his life is bound up in the lad’s life,” as one of them expresses it (Genesis 44:30). So they know of old Jacob’s love for his youngest son, Benjamin, but by now they seem not to begrudge that love. Perhaps the horror of what they had done years ago to Joseph has cured them of that kind of jealousy that erupts into violence.

Let me speak of one of these brothers in particular. He is an older brother named Judah. At best all of these brothers are fair-to-middlin men, like many of us. They are not saints, they are not geniuses. They are their own individual mixtures of good and bad. So it is with Judah. He is a mixed man. Back when the ten brothers were set on killing young Joseph, it was Judah who interceded for the boy. He did not quite save Joseph, but he did moderate the suffering. He did so by appealing to the greed of his brothers. He argued that it would be more profitable to sell Joseph into slavery than to outright kill him. The outcome was likely to be the same. Still, Judah’s argument at least held out some hope for Joseph. His reasoning gave Joseph a chance. Judah argued this way:

26 Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood? 27 Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers heeded him. 28 Then Midianite traders passed by; and they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver; and they took Joseph to Egypt. (Genesis 37:26-28, RSV)
Twenty pieces of silver and the deed was done. The ten older brothers go home and persuade their old father that Joseph is dead.

That was long ago, at the start of the story of Joseph. Now Joseph is governor of Egypt. He has glory and wealth and power, and he manipulates the scene in such a way that young Benjamin seems to be at risk. Here is when that fair-to-middlin man Judah once again shines. Judah interposes himself. He stands before Joseph, whom he does not recognize, and he begs the man to spare young Benjamin. He urges Joseph to hold himself, Judah, as hostage. Judah says this:

33 Now therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy; and let the boy go back with his brothers.
34 For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father. (Genesis 44:33-34, NRSV)

Do you see what I mean about everyone being older and wiser? Long ago, when the older brothers did their wickedness toward Joseph, they cared little either for their younger brother or for their old father. But now things are changed, they have changed for the better so that these older brothers now care for young Benjamin and for their old father. They know that their father favors Benjamin, as he favored Joseph long ago, but that does not spoil their souls. They have learned to have some mercy. They have mercy on Benjamin and they have mercy on their father.

When all is said and done, in the great reconciliation scene between Joseph and his brothers, Joseph speaks of God. He does so in order to comfort and reassure his brothers, who, naturally are frightened to discover that this mighty governor of Egypt is the very brother they were willing to destroy so very long ago. So Joseph comforts them by speaking of God. He says this:

4 So Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near to me, I pray you.” And they came near. And he said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. (Genesis 45:4-5, RSV)

Now, I am not so sure about the morality of this line of thought. I am quite sure it would be wrong for any of us to conclude that we can go ahead and yield to misery and violence, figuring that God will use our wickedness to “preserve life.” Certainly our God can do that. Certainly our God can take our sinful deeds and turn them around and make them useful for building up his kingdom. But we should never use that as an excuse for doing wicked things. Remember what the Bible says about our wrath:
Long ago these ten older brothers yielded to their wrath and nearly destroyed their younger brother Joseph. The Lord brought good from out of their sin, but still they ought not to have sinned as they did. Shame on them! They did wrong long ago when they were young. The beauty of this story is that in the end there is reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers.

Now let us turn to our Gospel reading for this morning. Joseph of old was right when he spoke of God when he was trying to comfort his frightened brothers. It is in the story of Jesus, the only begotten Son of God, and in his preaching that things become more precise about forgiveness.

The commandment to love our neighbors is not new. We find that commandment in the Old Testament too. In the Old Testament, for example, we read this:

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:18, NRSV)

But this commandment to love your neighbor can leave people wondering about two kinds of neighbors. Suppose your neighbor is a stranger. Well, Jesus clarifies the teaching regarding the stranger through his parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) — because, after all, the lovely thing about the Good Samaritan is that he considers a poor and beaten foreigner and stranger to be his neighbor, and he treats that neighbor with love.

But now there is a more extreme question: suppose your neighbor is your enemy. Suppose your neighbor is someone you hate or who hates you. Must love go that far, so as to love the enemy? Well, in this morning’s gospel story Jesus clarifies the matter. He goes beyond the old natural rule of loving your neighbor and hating your enemy. Instead Jesus teaches this:

But I say to you that hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. (Luke 6:27-28, RSV)

Therefore if you should contemplate someone, measure him up and down, measure her up and down, and conclude that that person is your enemy, then Jesus gives us the charitable counsel to love that person and to pray for that person. And well we should pray for that person, because the heart of any prayer for any person is that that person should draw closer to Christ. And if that should be so, it will be good both for our enemy and for us.
Furthermore if our enemy should seek our forgiveness, Jesus teaches us to grant our forgiveness. If our enemy should come to us and say, “I am sorry for what I did. I mean to do better. I hope you will forgive me,” then Jesus says to us, Forgive. How many times? Seven? No, endlessly! Jesus puts the point this way:

Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” (Matthew 18:22, RSV)

That is for the one who has hurt us but is sorry and seeks our forgiveness.

And then, there is a final case — the case of the one who is presently engaged in hurting us, who is plunging headlong into violence against us, and who is not at this time sorry for the harm he or she is doing. For that awful case, we have the example of Jesus on the cross, who looked down at the soldiers who crucified him and prayed for them:

Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. (Luke 23:34, KJV)

These things in the life and the preaching of Jesus are the principles we should keep in mind when thinking about matters of forgiveness. Jesus expects more from us than usual. He came preaching about a new kind of world—the kingdom in which there is much forgiving going on.

You know how much I love the Old Testament’s images of the kingdom of God. I have referred to them many times in sermons over the years. I love the idea of a world in which the wolf lives in peace with the lamb, and where there is no more suffering, nor death, nor grieving, and where God himself wipes away the tears from every eye. I love the notion of the city in which the heart of every person is filled with the law of the Lord, which means, is filled with the love of Jesus. What a great city that will be!

But one thing I notice about these beautiful images of the kingdom of God is that they do not seem to speak of forgiveness. They do not seem to speak of the reconciliation of aggrieved parties. They do not seem to speak of us and our enemies sitting down and talking things out.

But I am fully persuaded that in the kingdom of God there will be a lot of forgiveness going on. It would take a psychotherapist to figure out why it is that Joseph’s brothers threw him into that pit and then sold him into slavery. It would take a psychotherapist to figure out the ebb and flow of emotions and pressures that tempted us and pushed us toward doing the wrong things we did or which we suffered from others. But judging by the life and the preaching of Jesus he cares an awful lot about the practice of forgiveness. And so I imagine that there is going to come a good day, if not now then in eternity, when Jesus is going to say to us and to our enemy, “I want you two to
sit down and talk this thing out. I will be with you. I will moderate the
conversation. I will help you put into words the pain you each have suffered. I
will help each of you to understand the harm you have done. If one of you was
an innocent bystander and victim of the violence of the other, I’m going to
make sure you both understand deep in your hearts how awful this has been.
We are going to keep working at this until each of you understands the truth
of the situation, repents of the harm you have done, and is at last willing to
forgive.”

This means that the forgiveness and reconciliation that often goes along so
imperfectly in our present life will have more success in the life to come. If it
is too late for reconciliation, perhaps because too many years have passed or
our enemy has died, or if we just cannot manage to do it, still we should hope
for reconciliation in Christ’s kingdom. But let us begin now to get to work on
this forgiveness and reconciliation. Let us get a head start on this job of peace.
As far as lies able to us, let us live now seeking the forgiveness and
reconciliation that Jesus preached and performed in his own life. Let us get
ourselves ready as best we can for that great kingdom of peace ahead of us—
that kingdom gathered around Jesus, to whom belongs the glory with the
father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen