

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

My text for today is our Old Testament lesson from Genesis and my topic is forgiveness.

There are a lot of hot topics in the Bible. A lot of touchy subjects that generate a lot of controversy in today's world. I bet you could come up with a list. But I wonder how many people would include forgiveness as one of those controversial topics.

How could anybody have anything against forgiveness? To those of us used to seeing words like kindness, toleration, and peace proclaimed from bumper stickers everywhere, it is hard to imagine that forgiveness is not also now an unquestioned universal value. In reality, it is under increasing threat in our society.

An article in the magazine *Psychology Today* reports the following incident. Robert Enright is a licensed therapist and professor of educational psychology at a prestigious university. An academic leader at a different university requested Dr. Enright's help in setting up a program for his school's counseling center so that the college mental health professionals could receive training in "Forgiveness Therapy." The idea was that forgiveness would give hurting students another option in the healing process. I think most of us here would probably nod our heads in approval at that idea, but the dean in charge of that school shut that project down.

What was the problem? Even just proposing the possibility of forgiveness is another way of victimizing the victim and letting the perpetrator off the hook, according to his logic. This dean did not want any sort of forgiveness program at his school, lest he be accused of undermining the pursuit of justice. And so the program was scrapped before it even started.

The notion that forgiveness is incompatible with justice is getting a lot of attention these days, even if it's not a new idea. It's as old as time. Many people are troubled by the possibility that forgiveness lets wrongdoers off the hook. They may claim that forgiveness is morally inappropriate. And since the very heart of the Christian message revolves around forgiveness of sin, it is not surprising that Christians have been singled out as some of the worst

perpetrators of injustice in their emphasis on mercy and reconciliation.

Here is one example. You may have heard of a reality TV show that used to be on the air called *Nineteen and Counting*. It featured a family of very conservative evangelical Christians, the Duggars, with a total of nineteen children. A few years back, a scandal broke out featuring one of the sons who had grown up on air and gone on to have a TV family of his own. First it was revealed that he had abused his sisters as a teenager, and then far worse crimes were revealed that ended up with his being arrested and very justly being sentenced to a lengthy prison term. I never watched the show, although I have read a handful of articles on the now cancelled series. I'm going to be upfront and admit that I really hate reality TV, so I for one am not sorry it was cancelled, but there is one aspect of media coverage of the case that has always bothered me.

It is fair to question the Duggar family's interpretations of the Bible, which differ even from the approach to Scripture taken in our own confessional Lutheran church. It is fair to ask if they were exploiting their children by putting them on television as minors and making money from it. It is absolutely right to condemn the abhorrent crimes committed by the adult son, and when it came to light that this son exhibited tendencies to such abuse even as a teen, it is natural to wonder if his parents had done enough to address his troublesome behavior. His parents and community punished him for what he did, but then they forgave him and tried to restore him to righteousness, and it seemed at the time that they had succeeded. I am neither condemning nor defending the Duggars, and frankly, I wish we lived in a society where nobody, from progressives to conservative homeschoolers and everybody in between, felt the need to air their private lives for the consumption of voyeurs.

What bothers me is that so many commentators on the Duggar scandal latched onto the idea of forgiveness itself as the root of the problem. The real issue, according to these commentators, is that the Duggars forgave their teenage son and helped him reconcile with his family. In their eyes, the fact that he went on to commit even more grievous sins years later is proof that forgiveness itself is toxic. I guess they think his family should have cast him out and never extended the possibility of mercy and restoration to their wayward son.

Now the Duggar example is extreme and so notorious that I hesitated about using it, lest I be misunderstood, but it is just one example among countless. And after all, it illustrates one of the shocking claims at the heart of our faith. Sinners can be forgiven. Even sexual abuse can be forgiven. It is right and just

to protect society by restraining and even punishing criminals in the secular courts, but that does not erase the fact that we as Christians believe that there is no crime, and no sin, which in the end is unforgivable. Jesus died on the cross to make forgiveness of even the most wretched sinners possible.

Contrast that idea to the increasingly vindictive nature of our current cancel culture. Take the example of girl named Mimi. I don't want to say her last name because I don't want to contribute to publicly smearing her. In 2020, she was accepted to her dream college and its cheerleading team, but her acceptance was revoked when a classmate posted a three-second Snapchat video taken when Mimi was fifteen years old. She used a racial slur (one common in music and pop culture and apparently widely used in her high school, but wildly inappropriate nonetheless) to express her joy at getting a driver's license. Most of us would chalk such behavior up to the immaturity and impulsivity of youth, but three years later, Mimi was made an example of and when her acceptance was revoked many prominent news outlets and commentators defended the college's actions. That is because the idea of forgiveness, even of a silly fifteen year old whose brain hasn't fully developed, is controversial. If we go around forgiving people willy-nilly for their wrongdoing, the thinking goes, we are not promoting justice.

These examples may seem sensationalist, cases where minor issues were blown out of proportion by media outlets desperate for clicks. There are other examples of public discussions about the intersection of justice and forgiveness in which the participants have genuinely wrestled with the issues and given them thoughtful moral consideration. Take the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which was established to help heal a country torn apart by the terrible legacy of racist apartheid. It is not that all secular public discourse about forgiveness is misguided.

We Christians may ourselves be guilty of making forgiveness look bad when we treat it cheaply. I am not sure what was supposed to happen in that "Forgiveness Therapy" program that got scrapped, but I am betting that nobody was going to talk about how our forgiveness was bought with a price, paid on the cross by the one Person who needed no forgiveness Himself. We live in a therapeutically oriented culture, and in such a heavily therapeutic culture, even forgiveness is often advertised as a way of achieving inner peace and feeling better, rather than as the reconciliation of brother with brother and sister with sister and man and woman with God.

Christians ought to know better. We know that forgiveness isn't cheap just like grace isn't cheap. We know that when we talk about the possibility and the necessity of forgiveness, it is not because sin isn't real, it is not because

people haven't done terrible things to one another that have hurt people and justly incurred the wrath of God. We know that forgiveness isn't just about feeling better on the inside; it is about restoring our relationships with one another and with the Lord.

And we know that forgiveness is made possible by one thing and one thing only. We ourselves are forgiven sinners, and the more aware we are of how great was God's mercy in restoring us to fellowship with Him, the more our hearts cry out to see the rest of the world embraced in this act of loving reconciliation. The more we long to see even the sexual abusers, the racists, the bullies, the murderers, the thieves and all the other sinners repent and turn to Jesus, because we know we have to say in our heart, "There but for the grace of God go I."

This brings me, at last, to the story of Joseph and his brothers.

This story from Genesis is a favorite of this congregation. Several times in the past when Pastor Greg has solicited beloved Bible stories for a Lenten preaching series, this story was one of the top choices. It is moving. The image of a weeping Joseph embracing his brothers and being reconciled to them is as beautiful as the image of the father weeping and embracing the prodigal son in the parable told by Jesus.

On one level, the whole story and the character of Joseph himself prefigures the New Testament. In this instance, Joseph, like Moses and David and many other figures in the Old Testament, points us to Christ.

But Joseph and his brothers were also real people, and oh, to have been a fly on that wall! If ever there was a dysfunctional family, Jacob and his sons are it. The story of Joseph and his brothers is an example for us, not just because it portrays an ideal for us to aspire to but also because it's about as real as any story can get.

Joseph's family exemplifies one of the trendiest terms in today's therapeutically oriented culture, generational trauma. The ten jealous brothers might seem like clear-cut villains and Joseph might seem as innocent as a dove, but go back and read the story a little more carefully. Their father, Jacob, seems to have created this situation by favoring one wife at the expense of his other wives (there's a reality show I *would* pay to see), and when she died, Jacob decided to honor her by spoiling Joseph and little Benjamin and treating his other sons like second class citizens. And lest we pile all the blame on Jacob, let's remember how dysfunctional his relationship with his father Isaac and his brother Esau were.

Is it any wonder that these brothers were filled with a murderous rage? Joseph paraded his status before his brothers, and we all know that sibling rivalry can turn deadly. The first murder of Abel by Cain was a fratricide after all. It is only by the grace of God that the brothers, who fully intended to kill Joseph, ended up selling him into slavery when they came across an unexpected band of Ishmaelites and decided to make a buck instead.

Let's not mince words. Selling your brother into slavery is pretty horrible. Attempted fratricide is horrible. These are not minor or petty sins we are talking about. When we talk about forgiveness, we are not just talking about hurt feelings or minor slights. We are talking about grievous sins. We are talking about fractured relationships, just like when we talk about abuse, racism, bullying, theft, murder, and other sins today, we are talking about fractured families and broken communities. We are talking about real sins. Don't think that the story of Joseph forgiving his brothers is not applicable to these other cases because somehow the story is more minor. These are all major league sins.

So how was Joseph able to forgive? It seems that Joseph had a lot of time to think and mature during his years as Potiphar's slave and then Potiphar's prisoner and then as Pharaoh's right-hand man. He witnessed other people being victimized the way he had been, and maybe that caused him to reflect and stop feeling sorry for himself. Maybe he started to understand that the world actually didn't revolve around him. As he grew up, perhaps he started to look back and cringe at what a spoiled, pretentious little brat he was to his brothers when he rubbed his good fortune in their faces. He understood that this didn't excuse their actions, but it helped him empathize with them. He began to see that he himself needed forgiveness and mercy and to recognize that he had indeed received such mercy from God, with Whom he grew closer and closer in his years of captivity. Joseph developed spiritual maturity, and when he was finally reunited with his brothers, that maturity enabled him to review the problem with extraordinary insight.

The brothers approached with fear and trembling because they were used to a world just like ours. They expected vindictiveness; they expected an eye for an eye. The family dysfunction was set to continue for many more generations until Joseph said stop. "Fear not, for I am not in the place of God." That takes spiritual maturity, to understand that you do not have the right to be the final judge even in a case that directly involves you, because you too are part of the sinful cycle and not completely innocent. You too need mercy.

Joseph does not minimize or deny what his brothers did. "You meant evil

against me.” He does not sugarcoat the sin, but he does acknowledge that because of God and His ultimate purposes, evil does not have the final word.

If this were a reality TV show, I can’t help but wonder what kind of editorials would get written about Joseph’s actions. Would it be deemed problematic that he forgave his brothers instead of demanding justice? Would he be blamed for minimizing the crimes against him and thus traumatizing other victims of similar crimes? Would the twitter mobs demand they all be cancelled?

The truth is that Joseph was able to forgive his brothers because he recognized himself as a forgiven man. And in extending the olive branch to them, he enabled them to see themselves as forgiven.

If the Joseph story doesn’t drive it home for us, why we can and *must* forgive, today’s Gospel lesson certainly does. Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive, and Jesus replies rhetorically, seventy times seven. That means as many times as necessary. I wonder if Jesus was thinking to Himself as He said this to Peter, “do you know how many times I have forgiven *you* just this week?”

Forgetting that you are a forgiven man or woman is a potentially deadly mistake. That is the moral of Jesus’s parable of the unforgiving servant. At the beginning of the parable, the servant owes the king ten thousand talents. Don’t quote me on this, but that is something like a bazillion dollars in today’s terms. In other words, the debt was unpayable, and yet the king had mercy and forgave the servant.

That forgiveness should have been the defining feature of his life. It should have made him like Joseph, able to see his position for what it was, dependent on the mercy of his Lord. He should have been able to forgive his fellow servant when that servant begged for patience. But he chose vindictiveness instead, undoubtedly believing in the justice of his cause. The result? He was handed over to be tortured. And lest we miss the point, which I am not sure how we could, Jesus reminds us that we too better forgive from the heart, because we are also benefactors of the King’s mercy.

It is a dangerous thing to have forgiveness amnesia. That is why we come to church. That is why we come week after week to confess and hear the words of absolution and to come to the very seat of mercy at Christ’s own table. We must never forget that we are recipients of the forgiveness bought at so great a price. Our job now is to pay it forward.

The world is confused about forgiveness. Sometimes it reacts with suspicion. Sometimes it cheapens forgiveness by minimizing sin. But forgiveness is not incompatible with justice and it is not just a way to make ourselves feel better and achieve inner peace. How the world views forgiveness and what it actually entails are as different as night and day.

Forgiveness is at the heart of Christian life. Forgiveness defines us as Christians. When we preach forgiveness, we are not minimizing sin or telling victims of crime and abuse that their experiences don't matter. We are saying, with Joseph, that God can take the evil we intend and turn into the good that He intends. We are saying that there is a way out of the cycle of pain, hatred, and vengeance. Jesus paid the ultimate price so that we would not have to choose between mercy and justice. Both are possible because Jesus came into this world to save sinners and reconcile them with God.

To Him be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.