

SERMON: Sunday 17th September 2017

Readings: Matthew 18.21-35; Genesis 50:15–21

Address

Forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

Our gospel reading begins with Peter wanting a get out clause. It follows on from our passage from last week, that taught about how we should deal with each other, and Peter responds asking, 'Okay we'll try that, but at some point, my patience will wear thin and I'll want to give up.' Jesus replies, 'Sorry, keep on forgiving and don't bother counting.'

We then have the story of a slave who begged for mercy from a king they owed a fortune to, mercy is received, and then the slave is brutal with someone who owed them pennies. The king hears about this and is no longer merciful.

Then we have our Old Testament reading with Joseph's brothers' panicking because their father has died and they fear Joseph may have been waiting for this to happen so he could exact his revenge.

Joseph had been Jacob's favourite, the wearer of the coat of many colours, and his brothers had thrown him in a pit and debated whether to kill him or sell him into slavery. Now whatever family disputes you've had, this one is hard to top?!

Joseph was sold into slavery and then, through his ability to interpret dreams, he rises through the ranks of Egyptian society to become the Pharaoh's second-in-command. Years later the family are reunited through a famine, some play-acting, and settle in Egypt under Joseph's protection.

We can relate to Joseph's brothers' fears. We have all surmised, or heard it said, that someone waited until a parent had died to make a drastic change in the lives. Waiting until a parent isn't around to finally be honest or selfish, and not have to deal with them being upset.

Joseph's brothers are very lucky, as the spoilt brat of their youth has grown into a mature and sensible man who has realised that even though their actions were abhorrent they set him on the path to where he is now.

We have Jesus telling us to keep on forgiving, and Joseph's example that even the worst actions are forgivable.

Yet, still we are surprised by forgiveness. When we see a family responding to the worst event of their lives by forgiving the person that caused it, we commend their character and often, their faith.

Forgiveness is made up of a whole web of connections. Some situations are clear cut. It is obvious who is the guilty party, who has been wronged, and what is being forgiven. But in the majority of cases there is a whole mess of circumstances, history, psychology, personality, perception, and a whole list of possible causes and effects that bubble around in our lives.

Peter is asking for a score chart. Peter wants to be able to keep a tally of all the wrongs someone has done to him so he can do what's expected and forgive, until he can justifiably get his own back. Peter wants to do the right thing up to a point, and then be justified in venting his frustration. But Jesus says, 'Stop counting, just forgive' and Joseph shows us that even the worst offences are forgivable.

Forgiveness is a personal choice to set down our resentment towards someone, to forget an obligation we feel we are due, and to release ourselves from a grudge we are holding against someone. Forgiveness can just be something we quietly do ourselves. Nobody else has to know. We just let it go, and move on.

Forgiveness can be something we declare, either openly or privately, with the person involved. Now this does get more complicated. Telling someone they are forgiven opens the door to a debate. Again, we need to follow the advice Jesus offered us last week to talk with them as a brother or a sister, as an equal, to talk to them as a fellow unique and essential member of the body of Christ. Telling someone they are forgiven can lead to replies such as: 'What for?', 'Thanks, but I'm not forgiving you!' or lots of crying and public emotion, which certainly won't do!

Forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

When you forgive, make sure you mean it. Don't just throw around forgiveness and secretly burn with resentment. Work through it until you're able to really offer it. Also, be open to the possibility that your forgiveness may come as a surprise to someone. They may not even be aware that you have felt aggrieved by them. Also, that it may lead to them forgiving you and being forgiven can be an even greater struggle than forgiving.

We never fully understand our own actions, let alone anyone else's, so we need to be open and embrace forgiveness as we offer and receive it. Forgive your brother or sister from your heart. Always. Whatever.

This is the pattern of forgiveness that Jesus teaches us to have with each other, and it is also the pattern he models for us of God. Jesus taught us to pray, 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.' We ask God to forgive the wrong things we have done, and promise to forgive those who have wronged us.

Forgiving others is how we live out the forgiveness God offers us. We are challenged to forgive each other every time, and we know that this is possible because God forgives us too.

But more often than not, we fall into Peter's trap and want to make forgiveness conditional. We want to be able to let someone off a few times, and then, after we've established our righteous superiority, condemn them. We want to make up rules: if they say sorry, we'll forgive them; if they promise not to do it again, sign up for a course, give a donation, or some other hoop we put in front of someone, for them to gain our forgiveness. Even worse, we sometimes have the temerity to put ourselves in the place of God and declare barriers to God's forgiveness.

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That is the teaching we have from Jesus, that is the example we have from Joseph, and we also have Joseph acknowledging that whatever worldly power he possessed 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?'

The Church, for most of our history, has fallen into the trap Jesus warned Peter about, and that Joseph escaped, of using divine authority to gain and wield worldly power. Offering forgiveness, and withholding forgiveness, are powerful means of exerting control. When the Church was in a position of power, we got away with it. Thankfully we now have the opportunity to repent for this and to get back to what Jesus actually told us to do.

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Forgiveness is at the heart of God, was lived in the life and death of Jesus, and is part of our calling as Christians. Forgiveness is an essential part of our humanity and reflects the divine image within us.

Forgive your brother or sister from your heart. Always. Whatever. **Amen**