

Forgiveness and Compassion

September 17, 2023

Genesis 50:15-21

Matthew 18:21-35

Prayer: God of ancient story and present moment may the words I offer in reflection, be acceptable to you and echo your wisdom in our time. Amen

I have been feeling rather nostalgic as of late. My eldest son moved out on his own this past long weekend. Isaac got a nice apartment in one of the newer communities in Saskatoon; he is not that far away. He is finished his degree and is subbing for the Public School system and working at Chop. He is 27 years old and he felt it was time to take the next step into adulthood.

I get it – it makes perfect sense but boy it has been hard on this Mama bear.

I have been thinking back to those earlier years when life was about the constant learning of boundaries and breaking of rules and working out consequences and saying “sorry.”

I'll spare you the details, and, more importantly, I will spare my family the embarrassment, but life use to involve a rolling tally of screen time and debates about who left a glass in the living room and who didn't put it away, and whose turn it is to take out the garbage or mow the lawn. And then there were the challenges of living with me. I have this thing about always having a back up – so you “have to” tell me when you open a new jar of say peanut butter – because that is when I put peanut butter on the grocery list. We always have a back up this way we don't run out of anything. Now if you forget to tell me that you opened a new jar and as a result we run out of something well - it isn't pretty.

A lot of other stuff went on in our house, to be sure - eating, playing with the dog, attending Baseball and Soccer games, watching reruns of “The Big Bang Theory,” but when I step back and look at the whole picture, grace was a key component.

At our best, most of what's going on is forgiveness and compassion. I think this is the case with most every family, and in every group of people pulled together by life? That's one thing I love about the Big Bang Theory it is a lighthearted showcase of a group of friends manage their way through a variety of grievances with one another. The majority of the episodes reveal how living as one community is really about constant negotiation.

It's about continuously fessing up, acknowledging shortcomings, and then showing grace. Usually with humor.

The story we have today, of Joseph in the book of Genesis is, of course, is all about acknowledging shortcomings and living with grace but on a very grand scale. It is an epic story of constant negotiations around mistakes of the past, and family trauma and cold heartedness. It goes way, way beyond who left a glass in the living room. It's got favoritism, human trafficking, fake death, lying...all kinds of sordid drama. I don't have time today to go into all the twists and turns. But in the end, forgiveness and reconciliation rule the day.

Joseph is miraculously able to overcome all of his bitterness, all of his pain, all of his anger - after being sold into slavery by his brothers - he is able to receive them once again in love. It is such an emotional scene...and so complex. Joseph hears the words of his father, whom he loved, and who loved him a bit too much. It provokes compassion and joy in Joseph, and then there is this culminating scene where Joseph weeps in front of them and then they're all like "I'm not crying, you're crying," and the brothers present themselves as slaves at Joseph's feet, but Joseph doesn't want that. He wants his brothers back, he doesn't was slaves. And somehow Joseph is able to see, in all that has happened, God leading them back to one another, restoring them as a family.

There are many things Joseph's story teaches us, but one of the main points is that a family can only function if no one is keeping constant track of wrongs. Forgiveness has to wipe the slate clean on a regular basis. Openness towards reconciliation needs to be present all the time, it is like oxygen. Otherwise, it kind of stops being family or community. It becomes chaos.

I think this is largely what Jesus means when he explains to Peter and the other disciples that they are to forgive people not seven times but seventy-seven times. Jesus doesn't literally want us to keep a tally of how many times you forgive someone and then stop at seventy-seven. He's being flippant with the number, turning the question back on Peter in a humorous way. Seventy-seven was kind of a way of saying, "don't count occasions of rule-breaking and forgiving because forgiveness isn't really able to be calculated. It's like he's saying; **be constantly gracious**. Don't ignore wrongdoings, by any means, or the pain they cause, but be aware of your ability to unburden people from their trespasses. Don't be "that one" who is constantly pointing out everyone's flaws in an unrelenting manner. Relationships are living and active and just as individuals need daily bread to survive, so to do we need forgiveness and grace and mercy. It's not just

a matter of being nice and thoughtful. Being generous with mercy is a matter of giving people oxygen.

Then Jesus tells the story of the slave who owes his king a wack of cash. And I think Jesus tells the story so the disciples are reminded that they, too have been forgiven. It's not just a one-way street. Our default stance of grace towards other people is grounded on God's grace towards us. We are being loved and forgiven all the time - seventy-seven million times. But again, we're not supposed to count.

The story Jesus tells is of a slave who owes an exorbitant amount of money to his king. Ten thousand talents may not mean anything to you or me, but historians say this would have been equivalent in Jesus' time to about 200,000 year's worth of wages. Scholars tell us that not even King Herod would have had that much in his treasury. How this slave ran up that kind of bill isn't the point. The point would be that there is no way he could ever pay it off. When the king prepares to sell him and his family, the slave falls down in humility and begs for time to pay it off. And instead of getting a new deadline or extension, which is what he asks for, he gets complete forgiveness of the debt. The king just lets him go!

But then the slave immediately turns around and comes across a buddy who owes him a much smaller amount. A hundred denarii which was equal to about four months of wages, so a very doable debt. He grabs the guy by the throat and demands the money. ----- What happens when you grab a person by the throat? You cut off their **oxygen** ----- The guy pleads and pleads, just in the same manner the first guy had done before the king, but instead of being merciful, instead of cancelling the debt, he throws the poor guy in prison. Now word of this, gets back to the king and I suppose that most kings probably wouldn't really get involved in their slaves' various private financial affairs. Most kings, I figure really wouldn't care about who owed who money or who was doing what to which person. I'm thinking most kings would have bigger fish to fry. But this story isn't about most kings. This king doesn't want this kind of stuff going on in his kingdom. This king has a higher vision for how things roll, and he finds that unmerciful slave and calls him wicked, throws him in jail and has him tortured until he pays the 200,000 years worth of wages. And the bit about the torture may freak us out a bit, because torture is terrible and inhuman. And yet. Don't we end up torturing ourselves when we withhold forgiveness and shut the door on true reconciliation?

I think that's what Joseph understood. Receiving back his brothers only as slaves, as subjects, would just prolong the torture of everything he'd been through. Doing the hard, often emotional work of listening and

restoring - **frees the person who does it** almost more than those who are forgiven.

Forgiveness and grace is like oxygen for God's people. We never outgrow this. We never outgrow the need to hear and know that we are set free from the brokenness that burdens us.

We never get too old to hear that former enemies can be restored to us as siblings.

We never get too old to receive the news that our debts have been cancelled. Across the board. It allows us to breath deep – it allows us to live.

Maybe Jesus tells **us this parable** in hopes that we realize we've been given to one another as brothers and sisters. And the bonds that connect us require constant attention, constant give and take, constant confession and assurance.

Now we don't ignore the wrongs we've inflicted on one another, certainly we take seriously the real damage that lasts, and the relationships that need to be ended because of violence and pain.

But today is a time to remember, that in the presence of the love of God; our default position, as forgiven and loved children of God, is not attack and torture, but listen and restore. Our default position is grace and mercy. Always God is leading us back to each other.

Thanks be to God!
Amen

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