

Unforgiven and Unforgiving

In the name of him who according to the plan and purpose of God suffered all evil for our good, dear friends in Christ: Today's Old Testament and Gospel lessons form an interesting couplet. Together they might make up a short documentary entitled *When Forgiveness Goes Wrong*. Not that there's anything wrong with the forgiveness that's given in the lessons; in both cases, it's perfectly good. Where it goes wrong is in how it's received.

In the first case we have Joseph and his ten older brothers. You remember the story: how the ten hated their little brother because he was their father Jacob's favorite. The fact that he also had prophetic dreams about them all bowing down to him one day, dreams that he was naïve enough to share with them, didn't help any. Comes the that day he's sent by his father to check on the brothers who are tending the family's sheep several day's journey away, and they seize the opportunity to deal with him. At first, they plan to kill him. But then a better option presents itself. They sell him as a slave to some Midianite traders headed to Egypt. They think their problem is gone for good with the added benefit they've got some extra cash in their pockets. And they lead Jacob to believe that his dearly beloved son was killed and devoured by a predatory beast. The old man is crushed. He spends the next twenty plus years in deep depression, mourning his lost son.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, things go from bad to worse for poor Joseph. He spends seven long years working as a slave for his Egyptian master. Due to his talents, he rises through the ranks, as it were, to become the head slave of the household, managing all of his master's affairs and making him rich in the process. The boss is happy. Unfortunately, so is the boss's wife who has been watching Joseph with a lustful eye. When he shatters her romantic fantasies by declining her indecent proposals, she accuses him of attempted rape. He's thrown into prison, where he languishes another seven long years.

At length, through a series of at first hopeful and then disappointing events, he is brought before the Pharaoh who has been troubled by dreams that his magicians and soothsayers are unable to interpret. Word is that Joseph can do the job. He does. He tells the Pharaoh that the dreams are a warning from God that for the next seven years the land of Egypt will enjoy record harvests. After them will come seven years of complete crop failure and famine. He proposes that the Pharaoh appoint a capable man to oversee a project to store up enough grain during the good years to tide them over the bad. "Brilliant idea!" the Pharaoh declares. "I'm appointing you to the task." And thus, Joseph becomes the second in command of all Egypt.

During the years of plenty, with Joseph's managerial skills, vast quantities of food are safely stored away. And when the famine comes, Joseph is in charge of distribution. This famine is not confined to Egypt. It extends to Canaan and beyond. And so it happens that the ten brothers are forced to travel to Egypt to buy grain to sustain their families. They soon find themselves before the brother they so ill used and sold. But they don't recognize him. It's been more than twenty years since they've seen him, and then he was just a teenager. The man before them now looks and talks like an Egyptian. (I suppose he walks like one too.) Joseph, however, knows them. And as they bow before him in reverence, he realizes that the prophetic dreams God gave him in his childhood are being fulfilled.

He now has them at his mercy. He has the chance to repay them in kind for all of the things he suffered because of their crimes against him. Or he could simply order them tortured and killed. Surely the temptation to do something like that was there. But Joseph does not succumb to it. He sees God's hand in all that has happened. He sees that the things he suffered were part of God's plan to save the known world from death by starvation. He reveals himself to his brothers and forgives them outright. Knowing that more years of famine are to come, he relocates them and their families to Egypt where he can continue to provide for them. And at long last, he is reunited with Jacob, the father he so loved and who so loved him.

All is well, or so it seems, for the next seventeen years. Joseph continues to work as the Pharaoh's right-hand man. And he's found good employment for his brothers who are tasked to keep the royal flocks of sheep and goats, in addition to their own, of course. All seems well. But then the day comes when old Jacob breathes his last and expires. And among the brothers, panic ensues.

Why? Because they really don't believe that Joseph has forgiven them. All along they've assumed that he has only been kind to them for the sake of their father. They've thought that Joseph didn't deal with them as they deserved because he didn't want their father to suffer the loss of ten sons. One son was bad enough on him. But now with dear daddy gone, he has no reason not to let the hammer of justice fall.

Why do they think this? Two reasons: first, they still feel guilty. Even though Joseph has assured them that he no longer bears them any ill will and he's faithfully used his high position to their advantage all these years, they can't forget how badly they treated him. Even forgiven, they know they don't deserve it and they feel that justice must be done. Second, and more importantly, they can't imagine being so forgiving themselves if they were in his place. Because they know *they* couldn't forgive, they assume Joseph can't be either. They project their unforgiving hearts onto him.

So, what do they do? They concoct a story about how it was Jacob's dying wish was that Joseph forgive them. So doing, they hope to extend the protection they imagined their father gave them past the grave. What kind of son would Joseph be to deny his father's last request?

When Joseph hears this, it breaks his heart. He suddenly learns that the brothers he has freely and completely forgiven have spent the last seventeen years still wallowing in guilt and trembling in fear because they don't understand or believe in his forgiveness. They don't trust his word on it. How does he know this? It's because he never told his father how it was that he came to be in Egypt. He never told Jacob of his brothers' sins against him. He knew it would hurt him to know what his sons had done, so he hid their guilt completely. So, what does he do with his brothers now? The only thing he can: he reassures them. He speaks words of comfort, peace, and forgiveness to them. He tells them again and again the truth that their unbelieving hearts find so difficult to grasp: I have forgiven you.

One of the local pastors once asked me why it is that we Lutherans have in our Divine Service a confession of sins and then the absolution by the pastor. I answered it was because faith comes by hearing the Word of God. So many Christians, perhaps you yourself from time to time (I know it's true of me) find the good news of our complete forgiveness in Christ simply too good to be true. Our innate sense of justice tells us that we deserve God's wrath and punishment and that sooner or later it must fall. And the devil is always right there accusing the conscience saying the same thing. Like Joseph's brothers, we find it hard to take the Lord

Jesus at his word and believe that it could be that simple and complete. And to a certain extent, we project our unforgiving hearts onto God.

As a result, we live in fear. It's not there all of the time, but way in the back of the mind in those quiet moments we have a nagging sense of uncertainty. We feel that our sins will be exposed and there will be a price to pay. I have no doubt that this is why nearly half of those who trust in Christ as their Savior also believe in a place called Purgatory. I read this last week that even some Protestant theologians are starting to accept the idea. Surely, they say, there must be some kind of punishment meted out on the guilty even if they have been "forgiven". The justice of God against sin and sinners must be carried out.

What they (and we at times) don't understand is that the justice of God has been carried out. That's what the passion and death of Jesus on the cross was all about. He bore in his flesh the penalty of the sins of the entire world. There is no debt yet to pay. With his blood he has covered our sins completely. They are hidden from the sight of God just as the sins of his brothers were hidden by Joseph. Standing in the blood bought forgiveness of Jesus, God our Father neither sees nor remembers a single sin you have done. He sees in you only the righteousness of the Son he loves. The problem is that we don't believe it. And so he tells us again and again. That's why we daily remember our Baptism. That's why we have confession and absolution. That's why we have the Lord's Supper. With these the Lord Jesus continues to comfort and speak kindly to our unbelieving hearts so that we will believe in his complete and perfect forgiveness.

And believing in this forgiveness, he wants us to extend it to others. That's what the Gospel lesson is about. In it we hear Jesus tell his disciples of the Unmerciful Debtor, which is not a historical account like that of Joseph, but rather a parable in which the villain is every one of us. Let's review the facts: a certain king wants to run an audit on his treasury's books and settle accounts. A servant is brought forward who owes the king ten thousand talents. To give you an idea of how much that is, a single talent is what a typical working man would have earned gross income in two years' time. If you run the numbers, in today's terms the guy owes the king well over a billion dollars. There's no way he could ever pay it. So, the king orders him and all his family to be sold into slavery. He won't get a fraction of what he's owed out of it, but at least it will stop the bleeding from his treasury.

But the servant pleads for mercy, asking for time. "I'll pay it all back. I swear I will." The notion is ridiculous. There's no way the guy could ever do it. But the king is inclined to mercy. He cancels the debt outright and sets the servant free. The servant tells himself, "This is my lucky day." Even luckier than he thought, it seems, for immediately he spies a guy who owes him 100 denarii. The way this story is sometimes told, you'd gather that's about worth the change in somebody's pocket; but that's not right. A single denarius was what a working man earned in a day; so we're talking about three months' gross wages. What's that in today's terms? Something between ten and twenty thousand dollars? It's a sizeable sum.

The recently forgiven servant falls upon his debtor with violence. He demands immediate payment. And when the guy asks for time, just like he did before the king, the unmerciful servant denies it to him. He has the guy cast into the debtor's prison to be held until every last cent he owes is paid.

When the king finds out, he's furious. He re-summons the servant and tells it to him straight. "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?"

The answer to the king's question could not be more obvious. In light of the immense debt that had been cancelled by the king, the servant should have forgotten all about the comparatively tiny debt that was owed to him. But for some reason, when the same question is put to any one of us, we always get it wrong. You, me, each one of us, we are the unmerciful debtor. Each and every day, when we confess our sins, the Lord forgives us the lofty mountain's worth of sin debt that we have incurred. Cancelled in full. Forget all about it. All paid for by Jesus. Done.

But when someone sins against you, well, that's different, isn't it? For some reason the evil inflicted on you by someone else always eclipses whatever evil you've been up to and with which you have hurt others and offended God. I'm forgiven by God; but by golly, you must pay what you owe me. Why is that? It's because you are the most important being in your universe. In your mind, offending *you* is far worse than offending the Lord. And that itself is a sin. It's the sin of self-idolatry: of making yourself greater than God.

I'm talking here in the abstract. I want you to put a face on it. I want you to picture in your mind a person who has offended you in some way by their words directly to you, by their words whispered behind your back, by their thoughtless or negligent actions, or by their deliberate and malicious sins against you. It doesn't make any difference what they did. And to tell the truth, it really doesn't matter if they've asked you for your forgiveness. You don't want to be held accountable to the Lord for the sins that you've not confessed. He forgives you the entire debt for Jesus' sake.

So, if you are holding a grudge, if you are refusing to speak to this person, if you are unwilling to cooperate with them or to be civil to them, if in any way you have failed to forgive them from your heart and are not treating them as if their sins against you never happened; in other words, if you feel they still must pay for what they did to you, it's proof that you have no understanding or appreciation for the debt of sin that God that has forgiven you in Christ. In short, it makes you an unbeliever in the Gospel. And unbelievers go to hell where all eternity is not enough time to pay the debt they owe.

And hopefully, that puts the fear of God into you; for the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. The fear of God is what brings us back with penitent hearts to Jesus and to his cross, where confessing our sins we hear again his words of kindness, comfort, and forgiveness. And being forgiven, we forgive those who sin against us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!