

Title: “Forgiveness in the Family”

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Genesis 50:15-21

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Service Readings: Gen. 50:15–21; Rom. 14:1–12; Matt. 18:21–35

The life of Joseph is a foretaste of the coming of the Messiah. We have experienced the greatest forgiveness of all; God’s grace was extended to us even though it was undeserved. Through his grace our relationship was transformed from enmity to adopted children. Let us follow that same pattern in our own relationships and forgive others, even when they don’t seem to deserve the forgiveness.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

In today’s Old Testament reading we listen in on an interaction between Joseph and his brothers. What was not read was the backstory: Joseph had been sold and sent to Egypt by his jealous, prideful brothers. But God blessed Joseph and prepared him for the day when they would be forced to face him and ask for forgiveness. They deserved nothing except their brother’s wrath but that is not how he responded. Our passage picks up from there:

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.” ¹⁶ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this command before he died: ¹⁷ ‘Say to Joseph, “Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.”’ And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.” ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people^u should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Today’s sermon is about forgiveness, and lest I become an example in it myself I assure you that I have received permission to tell you this story. If you know our dear daughter Annie, you know that she is.... well, confident. That is probably the best word for this trait. Sometimes that confidence displays itself as determination or persistence, and sometimes it displays, as you will see in this story, as stubbornness. For one day as a very young girl, she did or said something to her beloved Uncle Michael that was prohibited. Now, any *normal* child of this age would apologize, especially when prompted by a parent, and then move on with her life. But not Annie. Nope. She refused to do so, for whatever reason. It wasn’t because she felt she was right, she was just being.... well, stubborn. And so the promptings escalated until, finally a beloved toy was placed beyond reach, until those words of repentance were uttered. Twelve. Months. Later. That toy, now covered in dust, still sat unmoved. And Annie’s resolve? Just as unmovable. As parents, we had arrived at the end of our patience and so sat her down and informed her that today was the day: repent or the

toy would be discarded. Her decision? To learn how to say sorry in Spanish so that, in her mind at least, she had won. No true apology. But her beloved toy was back in her possession.

But what of forgiveness? Who knows? And who cares? On the day that she spoke her apology, no one could even remember what the transgression was! And the health of their relationship? It was never at risk. Annie loved Uncle Michael and Uncle Michael loved Annie. Her infraction had no impact on that.

Now, take this illustration and place it at one end of the spectrum of forgiveness. No real repentance, no relationship needing restoration. At the other extreme end is the cross and Jesus. And over *there* we experience the complete opposite. Real relationships are *really* broken: between God and ourselves. In our sin we view him as an enemy, one to be ignored, one to be discarded, even. We have no use for a God because we desire to play that role ourselves. And yet, forgiveness, *unearned and unrequested forgiveness*, is offered to us on that cross. But what stands in our way is our own stubbornness. We refuse to acknowledge that we *need* that forgiveness, refuse to acknowledge even that we *have* a broken relationship, much less that it needs to be restored. And in many ways then, we position ourselves back to the other end of forgiveness, the end where Annie positioned herself those many years ago. We stand firm in our denial about our broken relationship with God and we stand firm in our denial about our responsibility for the chasm that exists. And the worst? We stand stubborn in our conviction that nothing even *needs* to change.

And so, if there is to be any restoration, if there is to be any repentance, it won't be initiated from us. Instead, it will be provided *to us* from the cross, through Jesus. It will be *through him* that God will pave a path for restoration and repentance. But that path will be untraveled if left to our own desires. We are, as you recall, a stubborn people. And so God must initiate within us even the *desire* to travel down that path. And thanks be to God that he does, through our Baptism. He beacons us to him; he ignites the flame of faith in our hearts. And in that moment when we are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, God's Word, his power mixes with simple water to wash that stubbornness from our hearts. We are not simply changed, We are *completely* transformed. Our hearts are no longer stone, our eyes are no longer blinded to what has been offered us from the cross.

You see? This is not a simple transformation. It is not a simple change in our views about God and about ourselves. How often do we hear the world describe our baptism as nothing more than a simple ritual, a simple replay of a traditional act that has long lost any real meaning. And what of Christians? How often do we find that they view it as not much more than that. We all know people who see it as a one-day experience, an opportunity for family and friends to gather around food, and laughter, and a little baby. But after the sun sets, all that remains is a memory. And maybe some of you see baptism in the same way. You struggle to connect it to the greater story of what God has done, and is doing for you, personally. I understand that, because it is such a unique experience. It is something that has no comparison, no other example to help explain it.

Baptism is not a single event. It is not something that happens to you once and then is complete. It is much more than that. It is a *complete* transformation. Our entire sinful selves are put to death. Nothing less than that!. God's Word. Water. Death. This is the recipe. Our vengeful self, our enmity towards our creator is put to death. Why? Because our sinful nature can't be repaired. It can't be

treated. It can't be healed. It must be killed. And only after that does God breath into us new life. Only after death does God raise us from the dead, but not as our old sinful selves but as one *in* Jesus! We now live in him and he in us. You see, we are completely transformed, we are raised from the dead, and we now have a heart that has the desire to know and love God. We are now someone who now *wants* to travel down the path of restoration and forgiveness. This is not simply an event, it is a new life!

And when we acknowledge this transformation, When we place our faith in the saving work of Jesus, we *receive* the forgiveness that is offered us, and we allow the Holy Spirit to continue to work in us, to continue to break down our walls of stubbornness, of pride, and of everything else that might harden our hearts and close our eyes to the grace that God has bestowed on us.

When we acknowledge this transformation we begin to understand where we stood before Jesus and where we stand now. And through the faith that he sparked in our hearts, and keeps alive through the work of the Holy Spirit, our eyes now open, we begin to see that we belong on that far end of the spectrum of forgiveness; the Jesus end of it. No longer do we dismiss this spiritual reality. Instead we travel to the cross because we now *understand* it. We understand that our relationship was broken and that we were unable to repair it. We understand that something needed to be done about it. We understand that through Jesus, something was. We understand all this because we have been completely transformed.

But this transformation is not just internal but it also affects our outward actions as well. When we receive these gifts of grace from God, when our hearts are softened, we cannot *help* but change how we live our lives. And to focus in on the application of this passage, we forgive even when it makes no sense to do so. Joseph had no reason to forgive his brothers but he did because of his faith in God. This might be called transformational living, transformational forgiving. And it is a model for us as well. Where do we need to extend transformational forgiveness to our family members or to our friends? Who has hurt you so deeply that forgiveness is possible only because God has transformed you, only possible because you cling in faith to that knowledge and understanding that if Jesus forgave you, you can forgive them? This is transformational forgiveness and is a sign of transformational living.

You have been saved. You have been forgiven. You have been transformed. Is your life reflecting it?

Please pray with me.

We have experienced the greatest forgiveness of all; your grace was extended to us even though it was undeserved. Through your grace our relationship was transformed from enmity to adopted children. May we follow that same pattern in our own relationships and forgive others, even when they don't seem to deserve the forgiveness.

Amen.