

**7 Epiphany
February 20, 2022**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

The focus of this sermon is forgiveness. You were born as beloved child of God. You were created in goodness. But life happens. Along the way there are relationships that shatter, unfilled expectations, and the loss of our “better selves” as we navigate our lives. Our Creator wants us to be whole, and calls us to let go of all that separates us from the image of God in which we were made. Forgiveness is one of those ways to us to become all that we were made to be.

If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, what do we do with our anger ... our judgement ... our grudges ... our resentments ... at those who have offended us ... who have betrayed us in one way or another? What does it mean to forgive when the wounds are deep, and the pain is insufferable? And how are we supposed to get beyond those times when we betray ourselves ... when we act in ways that are not who we know ourselves to be ... and those actions hurt others, and ultimately, they hurt us as well?

The readings this morning give us some clues to an answer to these questions. Because the readings are about forgiveness. They are about the work of forgiveness, and what our spiritual ancestors ... including Jesus ... understood about forgiveness.

In our reading from the Book of Genesis, Joseph forgives his older brothers for sending him into a lifetime of hardship:

“Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.”

The Psalmist exhorts his readers to “refrain from anger, and forsake wrath,” because “fretting” over evil only leads to more evil.

In his first letter to the Christians in Corinthians, Paul writes about “seeds” that must die before new life can emerge. Maybe these “seeds” just might include our resentments, our grudges, our wounds, our prejudices. Paul reminds us that we cannot know ahead of time what God will do with the “bare” and perishable seeds we sow into the ground. All we can do is consent to “die” to everything that hinders new life, and trust that God will raise our dishonor and weakness into glory and power.

And finally, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus continues his “Sermon on the Plain” with teachings so countercultural, we hardly know what to do with them even now, two thousand years after he spoke them:

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.” And again: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

These readings don’t leave us much wiggle room, do they? No matter what we think of it, our call as people of faith is to walk in love ... to practice mercy ... to refuse revenge, recrimination, and rage.

But, how do we do that? Where do we even begin? “Forgive and you will be forgiven.” Obviously, Jesus took forgiveness seriously ... how do we do the same?

First, forgiveness is not denial. Forgiveness isn’t pretending that an offense didn’t matter, or that a wound doesn’t hurt. Forgiveness isn’t acting as if things don’t have to change. Forgiveness isn’t allowing ourselves to be abused and mistreated, or assuming that God has no interest in justice. Forgiveness isn’t synonymous with healing or reconciliation. Healing has its own timetable, and sometimes reconciliation isn’t possible. In fact, sometimes our lives depend on us severing ties with our offenders, even if we’ve forgiven them. In other words, forgiveness is not cheap.

Secondly, forgiveness isn’t a detour or a shortcut. Yes, Jesus insists on forgiveness. But forgiveness calls us first to mourn, to cry, and to hunger and thirst for justice. Forgiveness in our faith tradition isn’t something that is just soothing to our soul. Forgiveness works hand-in-hand with the difficult work of transformation. In other words, there is nothing godly about responding to systemic evil with passive acceptance or unexamined complicity.

Thirdly, forgiveness is not instantaneous. Forgiveness is a process ... it is a messy, non-linear, and often convoluted process that might leave us feeling healed and liberated one minute ... and bleeding out of every pore the next. In my experience, no one who says the words, “I forgive you” gets a pass from this messy process, and no one who has to struggle extra hard to forgive because of circumstance, or the depth of trauma should feel that they’re less godly or spiritual than those who don’t struggle.

Remember, Joseph’s brothers had planned to leave him in a pit in the wilderness to slowly die of thirst and hunger. It was only when his greedy brothers realized they could profit from selling him as a slave that his life was spared. How is that for a betrayal? Not only was it a betrayal of Joseph, but was also a betrayal of their father, Jacob. Remember, Joseph was Jacob’s favorite son, and the brothers told their father that Joseph had been devoured by a wild animal.

The story we heard this morning of Joseph meeting his brothers happened years ... maybe decades ... after he was sold as a slave. Joseph had risen to power in Pharaoh's Egypt. But, in those years between his being sold and the arrival of his brothers in Egypt, did he ... could he ... leave behind the feelings he had about being betrayed? Can you imagine what went through his body when he looked at these Israelites and realized that they were the very people who had tried to kill him ... they were his own brothers?

Before Joseph forgave his brothers, he wrestled with a strong desire to scare and shame them. In fact, he did scare and shame them. Forgiveness is something Joseph had to arrive at, slowly and painfully. There was no cathartic moment when the hurts of his past slipped off his back and rolled away. There was only life ... lived one layered, complicated, and unsentimental moment at a time.

Why? Because ... like all of us ... Joseph was created for goodness. He was created as a blessed child of God. He was created for a just and nurturing world ... for a family that will keep him safe. And just like Joseph, when we experience that good world being ripped away from us, it is appropriate ... it is human and healthy ... to react with horror. One of the great gifts of faith is that it takes betrayal and betrayal's consequences seriously. Betrayal wounds ... and those wounds hurt. Betrayal shatters relationships ... and the cost of those offenses ripple outward like a stone thrown in a placid lake ... and the repercussions of those broken relationships echo through the ages.

Forgiveness isn't an escalator ... it's a spiral staircase. We circle, circle, and circle again, trying to create distance between the pain we've suffered and the new life we seek. Sometimes we can't tell if we've ascended at all ... we keep seeing the same, broken landscape below us. But ever so slowly, our perspective changes. Ever so slowly, the ground of our pain falls away. Ever so slowly, we rise.

If forgiveness isn't denial or a detour, if forgiveness isn't quick ... then what is it? What is Jesus asking of us when he invites us to love, bless, pray, give, lend, do good, withhold judgment, extend mercy, and turn the other cheek?

I love the description Annie Lamont uses in her best-selling book, **Traveling Mercies** ... withholding forgiveness is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die. If Lamont is correct, then I think forgiveness is choosing to focus on love instead of resentment. If I'm consumed with my own pain ... if I've made injury my identity ... if I insist on make a weapon of my well-deserved anger in every interaction I have with people who hurt me ... then I'm drinking poison, and the poison will kill me long before it does anything to my abusers.

To choose forgiveness is to release myself from the tyranny of bitterness. To choose forgiveness is to refuse the seductive lie that revenge will make me feel better. To choose forgiveness is to cast my hunger for justice deep into God's heart, because justice belongs to God, and only God can secure it.

I wonder if we're often squeamish about forgiveness because we misunderstand the nature of unconditional love. Focusing on God's all-embracing love doesn't for one second require us to minimize evil. If it did, God's love would be cruel and weak, not compassionate and strong. But where we humans make love and judgment mutually exclusive ... where we cry out for revenge, retribution, and punishment ... God holds out for restorative justice ... a kind of justice we can barely imagine ... a kind of justice that has the power to heal both the oppressed and the oppressor.

I think forgiveness is a transformed way of seeing. When Joseph forgives his brothers, he reframes the horrible events of his life to include the redemptive artistry of God ... "God sent me before you to preserve life." To be clear, this doesn't mean that God willed Joseph's brothers to abuse and abandon him ... I don't believe that abuse is ever God's will. Rather, what Joseph is saying is that God is always and everywhere in the business of taking the worst things that happen to us, and going to work on them for the purposes of multiplying wholeness and blessing. Because God is in the story, we can hope for the resurrection of all things. There will be another turn, another chapter, another path, another grace. As Jesus promises his listeners, the measure we give will be given back to us ... "A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over." Because God loves us, we don't have to forgive out of scarcity ... we can forgive out of God's amazing abundance.

The work of forgiveness is some of the hardest work we can do in this world. It is also some of the most important work we can do in this world. So, may we stop drinking the poison of incivility and bitterness. May we glimpse the "better selves" that reside within the people who do us harm ... including ourselves. May we rise above all that wants to pull us into a self-imposed prison of anger, resentment, and grudges. And, may we taste the full measure of the freedom of life that awaits us when we choose to forgive.

This sermon is forgiveness. You were born as beloved child of God ... you were created in goodness. But life happens. Along the way there are relationships that shatter, unfilled expectations, and the loss of our "better selves" as we navigate our lives. Our Creator wants us to be whole, and calls us to let go of all that separates us from the image of God in which we were made. Forgiveness is one of those ways to us to become all that we were made to be.

I end with a quote that seems appropriate during Black History Month ... it is from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us, and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies."

Amen.