

Sermon: Year A, Pentecost 15, Proper 19, Lectionary 24
Texts: Genesis 50:15–21, Romans 14:1–12, Matthew 18:21–35
Preached: September 17, 2017

Grace and peace to you from the One who works for good in all things. AMEN

Why is it so hard to let go of anger? What benefit do we get from endlessly recounting to ourselves the wrongs done us, letting them fester, allowing them to rob us of our joy? It's a very human thing. I'm willing to bet that if I asked you to recount an incident from your life when you feel that someone treated you unjustly, and that still makes you angry when you think of it, you would have no difficulty supplying an example...and you might have trouble narrowing it down. Some of those memories of injustice hound us, follow us, consume us. And some of those memories we nurture. I can sometimes be like author Liane Moriarty, who says, "They say it's good to let your grudges go, but I don't know, I'm quite fond of my grudge. I tend it like a little pet." Sound familiar? What are the painful experiences of being wronged that come to you? And what are the experiences that you have allowed to fester? What are the experiences that have become for you a grudge? Sometimes it seems we can't forgive something. And sometimes we really don't want to forgive, do we? Some things are huge wrongs, and those are oh, so hard to let go of. But the strange thing is that we can grasp even minor wrongs, cling to them, nurse them, nurture them, and they loom larger and larger, cutting us off from those around us. Reconciliation is the last thing we desire.

But then we bump into Jesus telling us that we are to forgive the same person seventy-seven times—and actually, for some reason our translation, the New Revised Standard Version, lets us off easy. Most translations record that as "seventy *times* seven." That is really not what we want to hear, is it? We would prefer that Jesus tell us, "Give the so-and-sos what they deserve for acting unjustly. Let them be cast into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Often, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" is the kind of scripture we would prefer to hear. There are days when, instead of reading the beautiful assurance of Psalm 103 that God does not repay according to our sins, we would prefer to read Psalm 137, which says, "O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your babies and dash them against a rock!" (Cite that one to those who say that the Koran is violent, and the Bible is not!) Reconciliation may be the furthest thing from some of our minds, and forgiveness might seem unthinkable, abhorrent, disrespectful, foolish. Retribution and revenge may be our natural impulses. Yet this is the moment that the Living Word comes to us speaking of reconciliation and forgiveness.

The Joseph story reminds us that violence and betrayal are nothing new. Today's passage drops us into the middle—actually, the end—of the story, so to better understand what's going on, let me recite what came before. Joseph as a boy had ten older brothers, yet he was their father Jacob's favorite. Joseph was the favored child who was given a beautiful coat of many colors, the one who bragged to his brothers about his dreams that they would one day be bowing down to him. In their anger at his arrogance, in their jealousy because their father loves Joseph best, they decide to kill him. They beat him and strip him of his coat, the symbol of injustice to them, throw him into a pit, then sit down to eat lunch while they get up the courage to kill him. Just then, some slave traders show up on the horizon, and at the urging of one brother, they decide they will sell Joseph as a slave instead of committing murder. They take his coat and tear it and dip it in blood so that they can deceive their father and tell him that Joseph was killed by wild animals. Joseph is carried off to Egypt, where after many hardships, and being falsely accused and imprisoned, he ends up as top aide to Pharaoh's right-hand man. Years pass. A famine hits the region, and the brothers are forced to come to Egypt to find food. They encounter Joseph, though they do not recognize the grown man standing in front of them. But he certainly recognizes them. He finally reveals himself to them. They are terrified that Joseph will seek revenge, but instead, he sends them home to their father Jacob. While they are there, though, Jacob dies, and now the brothers are afraid that, without their father's influence, there will be nothing to prevent Joseph from seeking the revenge they so richly deserve.

So now here they are again in front of their brother whom they have wronged so grievously, and they make up a lie to try to shield themselves, saying that their father has ordered Joseph to forgive his brothers for their crime against him. They even bring God into it, reminding Joseph that they are servants of the God of their father Jacob. And Joseph weeps. The brothers, guilty and fearful, think Joseph is weeping in anger, so they throw themselves on the ground and begin to cry out in fear, offering themselves as slaves. The story suggests they're not really sorry for what they've done, but are more concerned about suffering the just

consequences of their actions. But instead of ordering their deaths, as he had the power to do, Joseph says to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God?” Instead of exacting revenge, he chooses to leave justice in the hands of God, to whom it belongs.

That temptation to play the role of God is very deeply ingrained in our nature. The problem with us playing God is that we don’t operate from God’s sense of justice...nor do we operate from God’s sense of mercy. Our first impulse is to retaliate, to strike out, to make the so-and-sos pay, and to pay dearly. We forget that God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and is merciful to us. We can’t imagine that God could be merciful to our enemies. We don’t want God to be merciful to our enemies, truth be told, though we certainly want God to be merciful to us. But in our anger, we respond out of retaliation, out of a desire for revenge, and in doing so, we perpetuate the cycle of sin and violence. There is no end to it. When in our hurt and anger we lash out and retaliate, rather than to forgive and trust in God’s justice, we pretty much ensure that what we most hate will happen again. And when we hold onto anger, let it fester, it becomes toxic to us. The anger then often does more harm to us than it does to the one we’re angry with. As Anne Lamott says in her book, *Traveling Mercies*, “Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.”

Why is that so hard a lesson for us to learn? Why do we fear that if we leave things in God’s hands that nothing will change? Why do we resist forgiveness and reconciliation as a path out of that cycle? Basically, I think, it’s because we fear that if we forgive, we will be doormats, that justice will not be realized, that we will put ourselves in harm’s way again because those who have done us harm before will see us as weak. But the forgiveness that God calls us to is not passive, doormat forgiveness that lies down and allows others to keep hurting us. Rather, it is *active* forgiveness that steps up and says, “I am putting an end to this cycle. I am not going to allow your actions or what has happened in the past to continue to hold power over me. There is a different way, and even if you are not choosing this way with me, I am not going to continue in the cycle of destruction. I choose the way of forgiveness, because I refuse to let past actions and failures define the future. God has a different way.”

The community of faith is a place to practice that until it becomes a habit. Both Jesus and Paul place the practice of forgiveness in the context of the gathered church community, sisters and brothers learning to forgive one another so that we can learn to forgive those outside the community as well. And Jesus acknowledges that the relationships in the community will be flawed, and will require frequent reconciliation and forgiveness... hundreds of times. He knows how we are. But he says we are to forgive as we have been forgiven. We are to remember that God has been merciful to us, and so we are to be merciful to others.

Paul addresses the church community in Rome, where everyone is judging everyone else, and resentments are abounding. Those who feel superior in their spiritual lives are eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols. Those less confident in their spiritual lives are scandalized at this practice, and have become vegetarians to avoid stumbling. Some are insisting on observing a rigid calendar of sacred days, while others think such things are silly or even detrimental. The divisions have become sharp and painful. People are judging one another, and resentments have grown. Grudges have been nursed. And Paul tells them to cut it out and to forgive one another, to let go of it, because what matters is God’s sovereignty and God’s justice and mercy. We are to stop judging one another, and to forgive as we have been forgiven.

We forget that God can change even gross injustice to some sort of good. Joseph speaks a profound truth to his brothers that gets lost in translation. Our translation says, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.” Now, on the face of it, it would seem that he is saying that God planned this terrible sin against Joseph in order to pull off a bigger scheme. But where it says “God *intended* it for good,” what the Hebrew actually says is that “God wove it for good.” In other words, God took the evil that Joseph’s brothers had done, the evil intentions that they wove, and God reweave events in order to bring good out of the evil. That is God’s way. God did the same thing in Christ Jesus, suffering the worst that people could do...and then took that evil and brought the greatest good out of it. That, brothers and sisters, is why we can trust that God will bring justice. That is why, even though we struggle to find forgiveness in our hearts, we can learn to trust God’s Spirit to teach us the way of God’s justice, forgiveness, and mercy. The God who dwells in us can take even our most broken experiences and reweave them, can create good out of them. Ours is the God who can teach us the way of forgiveness, the God who can teach us the path of reconciliation, the way of letting go of the past so that a new future can come.

Thanks be to God. AMEN