



Pentecost 15-September 13, 2020
Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish
Genesis 50:15-21 and Matthew 18:21-35
"Payback"
Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.

"Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." No, you didn't hear this old proverb in any of the scripture reading for today. In fact, Peter was several more times generous when he asked Jesus, "How often should I forgive, as many as seven times?" As this saying goes, if you keep falling for the same thing time after time, you only have yourself to blame. If you have been tricked by someone once, this old adage warns against giving anyone second chances because the probability of expecting any different behavior from people who have wronged you in the past is highly unlikely.

In the first lesson for today, Joseph's brothers were expecting a payback for all the evil things they had done to him. But if you had been a brother of Joseph, you might have wanted to harm him just like his 11 brothers did. I suspect that that scripture probably didn't record all of the times Joseph tattled to his parents about his brothers, but scripture tells us that at the age of 17, Joseph went to Jacob, their father, and gave him a report of how these 11 brothers were misbehaving. The tension between Joseph and his brothers only grew worse when Jacob showed favoritism toward Joseph by giving him a robe with long sleeves which you remember as the coat of many colors. This unresolved jealousy of the brothers toward Joseph grew deeper into a hatred for his brothers when Joseph told them his two dreams. In one dream the brothers were sheaves of grain bowing down to a sheave that was standing and in the other they were stars in the sky bowing down to the sun. Joseph's brothers' dislike for him grew as he interpreted these dreams to mean that he would rise to power and be greater than all his brothers and his parents. Joseph told them that one day they would all bow down to him. This hatred escalated to the point that his brothers began plotting to kill Joseph.

If Joseph expressed his superiority once, his brothers may have overlooked a onetime sin. But Joseph seemed to pour more salt in this wound of greatness over his family whenever he had a chance. Joseph's brothers decided the best way to quit hearing about Joseph's greatness was to silence him for good. The first plot was simply to kill Joseph and throw him in a pit and say that a wild animal had killed him. Reuben, the first born in this family, convinced the other brothers not to kill him, but instead strip him of the special coat that his father had given him and throw him in the pit without any water and let him die of thirst. He wanted to make it at least look as if Joseph died a tragic death, but without any fault on their part. While the brothers were eating together after just dropping Joseph in the pit, a caravan of travelers came by and the plot of letting Joseph die in the pit was amended by selling Joseph into slavery. The brothers decided to at least make a little profit for all the harm they felt Joseph had caused them.

Joseph's brothers were adding up the number of times that Joseph had sinned against them and felt he deserved what he had coming to him. Joseph's brothers never asked their father the question Peter asked Jesus, "If our brother sins against us, how often should I forgive him?" Instead of facing sin head on by naming it and forgiving it, the brothers let the sin continue to fester and they began to live in fear that Joseph would one day pay them back for the harm they had plotted.

Many interesting parallels can be drawn between the stories of Joseph and Jesus. There were 12 brothers in Joseph's family and Jesus had 12 disciples. Joseph's brothers deserted him and so did Jesus's disciples. Joseph was thrown into a pit to die. Jesus descended into hell. Joseph was resented by his own family, but outsiders recognized and appreciated what he could do for them. Scripture tells that Jesus was not looked on favorably by his family, but Jesus' healing and forgiveness was welcomed by foreigners. The greatest similarity between Joseph and Jesus is how they repaid those who sinned against them.

Joseph had the position and authority to repay the many wrongs that his brothers had done against him with slavery and even death. Even while facing these punishments, Joseph's brothers conjured up another story appealing to Joseph's love for his father Jacob by telling Joseph that just before Jacob died it was his wish that Joseph forgive his brothers. Regardless if Jacob made this request or not, (since it was not recorded in scripture) Joseph didn't repay the evil that his brothers did to him with evil. Joseph dealt with their sin with forgiveness. Joseph wiped every sin that they had committed against him away. Joseph wept with his brothers and told them not to fear.

In last week's gospel, Jesus taught his disciples that when someone sins against you, you are to go to that person privately to rebuke and forgive the sin. Peter raised the question but gave a little more grace than the Italian quote that warns against even second chances. Peter asks if he should limit forgiveness to 7 times. And as you heard, Jesus tells Peter not 7 times, but 77 times in the version we heard today, (other versions say 70 times 7). Whatever number you choose, Jesus teaches that forgiveness should be limitless.

Jesus then tells how the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wished to settle his accounts with his slaves. The first one who was to be reckoned with owned so much that it was impossible to repay. Doing a little biblical math suggests this amount to equal wages that would take 150,000 years to earn. However, the slave who owed it pleaded with the king to have patience and promised to repay everything. But Jesus said, it was out of pity the slave was released and forgave all his debt.

Notice how quickly the slave forgot the mercy he had just received. It wasn't a year later, or after a week had passed or even the next day, but we are told that as soon as the slave was released and forgiven, the same slave confronted another slave who owned him a debt that actually could have been repaid if given enough time. But this same slave who had been forgiven a debt that was impossible to repay, did not forgive his slave who owed him an amount that may have taken three months to repay. He didn't have patience or pity like the king had just had for him. Instead, he demanded full repayment and in anger sent the slave to prison.

The story of Joseph and his brothers could have ended much differently. Joseph's brothers deserved and expected punishment for what they had done to Joseph. However, Joseph repaid them with mercy and

forgiveness. Joseph didn't forgive part of the debt and make his brothers work to pay off even a realistic balance. Joseph forgave them completely and told his brothers that even though they intended to harm him, God intended it for good.

With all the similarities between Joseph and Jesus, one major difference separates them. Joseph was a sinner. Joseph rose to great power, but he was not God. But we have heard the story of Joseph today as good news to know that sinners can forgive as God has forgiven them. You and I have been forgiven an impossible debt from Jesus Christ. He has removed our sins as far as the east is from the west. Jesus has given you the ability and authority to forgive your closest brothers and sisters. Jesus Christ died because of our sin, but God meant it for good. He meant it for you. Amen.