

Pentecost 16-September 17, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Genesis 50:15-21 and Matthew 18:21-35

“Forgiveness Removes Fear”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Have you ever thought about that whenever sin remains, so does fear? When Adam and Eve sinned, what did they do next? They became afraid of God, and they hid from God in the garden. When Cain killed Abel, he feared what God would do to him. The tension between Jacob and Esau grew until they decided to part ways when they failed to forgive. The disciples were not celebrating the risen Savior on Easter morning. They were afraid. They had locked themselves away from Jesus because they feared what he might say to them for deserting him as he died on the cross. Today, we have two more stories of people who have good reason to fear in the absence of forgiveness.

If you have been following these stories from Matthew, you could say that things hadn't been going very well for Peter lately. You can imagine that Peter might have been afraid of what Jesus was thinking about him. Peter may still have wondered why Jesus got so upset when he forbade Jesus to take the path of suffering for our salvation. Peter's easier plan for salvation likely was the path that many today still believe is possible. Jesus could instead first teach his disciples and then teach other followers of Jesus to be more obedient. That way we could cooperate and help Jesus with our salvation. We could help Jesus to save our own skins by having some skin in the game. Peter doesn't do anything to improve his standing with Jesus today either. Jesus had just given Peter two keys which we call the office of the keys. Keys that have also been given to each of us. One key is to bind sin and the other key is to forgive sin. Jesus then gave his disciples a case study which we heard about last week of how to use these keys when a member of the church sins against another. To Peter, it may have sounded like a three-step process of going first going to the sinner in person, then if that failed, to bring along two or three witnesses, and then if that approach failed, what sounded like the last resort was to expose the sin in front of a larger group of the church and see if they would repent. In Peter's mind, it sounded like three-strikes and you're out. However, Peter didn't want to be scolded by Jesus again, so Peter answers his own question to Jesus about how often to use the key to forgiveness when someone from the church sins against him. Before Jesus could speak, Peter more than doubled the three strikes and you're out rule in hopes of getting a pat on the back from Jesus.

It was Peter who ended up striking out by laying out what he thought were generous rules for forgiveness. But that was Peter's problem. Peter wanted to make a set of rules to fit forgiveness. The answer that Jesus replied with was translated in what we heard today as 77 times, but other translations suggest Jesus said 7 times 7 or even 70 times 7. It really doesn't matter what number you use; Jesus gave his answer to mean there is no limit to the number of times Peter and you and I are to use the key that has been given to us to forgive. Fear had also returned to Joseph's brothers in the first reading for today. This narrative of Joseph and his brothers begins 13 chapters before what we heard today. The story of the relationship between Joseph and his brothers is full of drama and sin. The sin you might say, didn't begin with Joseph's brothers. If we want to point out blame, you could say that it began with Joseph. Joseph was a bit of a jerk himself. He was favored by his father Jacob because he was an offspring of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. The bible records that Joseph got a special coat to show off from Jacob while his brothers got chores to do. When Jacob saw that his brothers weren't tending to their chores, he went to their father and tattled on them. Another curse and blessing Joseph had was that he was a dreamer and could interpret dreams. His first dreams were about his brothers and how he would rise above them one day and rule over all his 11 brothers. Joseph could have kept these dreams to himself to curb some additional jealousy. But he didn't. He proudly told the details of these dreams to his brothers. The sin that Joseph's brothers had against Joseph began as jealousy, but it didn't stop there. It turned into anger. Then the anger turned into hatred. And the hatred led them to the point of wanting Joseph dead.

I love the stories of Joseph and I could preach to them until Christmas, but today's message is about removing fear through forgiveness, and this certainly took place in the story of Joseph and his brothers, but it didn't happen immediately. Joseph's brothers wanted him dead instead of forgiving him. They threw him in a pit with the hopes that an animal might kill him, or he would die of starvation, but they thought they were off the hook if he didn't die directly by their hands. Then they sold Joseph into slavery and once again, it was their hope that he would be worked to death by his owners and once again, they could have some peace that they really couldn't be tried as murderers. But Joseph's dream about his rise to power came true and he had the authority over the grain in Egypt while the rest of the world was in a severe famine. Joseph let his brothers think that he was dead. They came to him to get grain and he helped them, but he did not let him know who he was right away. But just before what we heard today in the first reading, he did reveal himself to them and they embraced each other. You would think that all was good between Joseph and his brothers. That was until their father, Jacob died. Fear returned to Joseph's brothers. Joseph still had the authority to retaliate against his brothers. The sin that Joseph's brothers had done had resurfaced and they were afraid of him. They even returned to their evil ways by lying to Joseph that Jacob had told them to tell Joseph to forgive them. Even though they lied, they begged for mercy and pleaded for forgiveness. Joseph did not directly say, "I forgive you." He said, "Do not be afraid". Joseph told his brothers that even though they intended to harm him, God intended it for good. They were forgiven **again**, and their fear of Joseph was removed.

Peter's fear of Jesus was not removed in the words that you heard today in the gospel reading. Instead, Jesus tells Peter a parable. As I have told you before, when Jesus tells a parable, he doesn't do so to make you feel good about yourself. Jesus told this parable to Peter to let him know that he was abusing the keys to the kingdom by limiting the number of times to absolve someone of their sin. The parable begins with an impossibly large debt being forgiven by the lord, but then the slave who was forgiven does not forgive the small debt owed to him by a fellow slave. The slaves believe the solution to forgiveness is to give enough time for the debt to be paid, even if you are in prison while you are attempting to pay off the debt. The lord does not grant the request for more time, but instead forgives ALL the debt.

Without me retelling you Joseph's sins and his brother's sins, you might not have remembered what they did wrong. When Joseph released the fears of his brothers, he did not ask them to go back over each of their attempts to kill him. Nor did they blame Joseph for causing them to sin. It was time for forgiveness. It was time for what had happened in the past to be removed as far as the east is from the west.

Jesus did not leave Peter forever in fear of him. Jesus broke through the barrier that was separating them after he rose on Easter. When Jesus saw Peter and his disciples, they too were pleased that Jesus did not ask them to go through every sin that they had committed against Jesus. Again, Jesus did not directly say the words, "I forgive you". Jesus said, "Peace be with you." And then he repeated those same words again which mean the same thing as "Do not be afraid" and "Your sins are forgiven".

Our psalm for today tells us that we have good reason to fear our Lord. We have sinned against him, and we deserve punishment. We deserve to give a detailed accounting of our sins, just as the lord in the parable was going to settle his accounts with his slaves. Our confession and forgiveness that we do week after week is for that very purpose. We do not need to name each of our sins out loud for everyone to hear. Our Lord knows our every sin. Even those we don't think we have done. But each of us comes to our Lord with nothing. We come as beggars to plead for mercy. We don't plead for more time to work off our debt. We simply plead for mercy. Thanks be to God that we are not limited by any number of times to come to the well of forgiveness and that there is no sin so great that will not be forgiven. You have heard it once already today, but since we cannot wear out the key to forgiveness, listen again. "Do not fear, your sins are forgiven." And since you now have been freed from a debt you could never repay, you are also freed to forgive your neighbors for the small debt owed to you. Amen