

## ***The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 19A/Lectioary 24]***

Genesis 50:15-21

Psalms 103:[1-7] 8-13

Romans 14:1-12

**MATTHEW 18:21-35**

*A Sermon for Every Sunday*

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Life in the Martin house—that is, my house—right now is a life of constant learning of rules and breaking of rules and doling out consequences and saying “sorry.” I’ll spare you the details, and, more importantly, I spare my family the embarrassment, but with a 7-year-old and two high schoolers, daily life involves a rolling tally of screen time and debates about who left which crumbs on the kitchen table and didn’t clean them up and whether or not certain people are allowed in certain people’s bedrooms without knocking.

And that does even include the issues of living with me. Do you know that I’ve never loaded the dishwasher correctly—not even once? I’m serious. It’s not just a matter of opinion. I’m really bad at it and (and have to confess) I don’t really try to get better. A lot of other stuff goes on in our house, to be sure—eating, playing with the dog, watching reruns of “Friends,” but when I step back and look at the whole picture, transgressions and confessions are really the crux of it. At our best, most of what’s going on is forgiveness and compassion.

Isn’t that the case with every family, though, every identifiable group of people? That’s one thing I love about the videos from the Holderness family, especially during this pandemic. The Holderness family is this relatively normal family of four who post regularly on social media in a very lighthearted but honest way, usually with music, airing some of their grievances with one another and showcasing daily life together. A great many of their videos reveal how living as one community is really about constant negotiation. It’s about continuously fessing up, acknowledging your shortcomings, and then showing grace. Usually with humor.

The story we have of Joseph in the book of Genesis, of course, is this on a grand scale. It is an epic story of constant negotiations around mistakes of the past, and family trauma and cold heartedness. It goes way, way beyond who left the crumbs on the kitchen table. It’s got favoritism, human trafficking, fake death, lying...all kinds of sordid drama I don’t have time to go into today. But in the end, a part of which we hear today, forgiveness and reconciliation rule the day. Joseph is miraculously able to overcome all of his bitterness, all of his pain, all of his anger, after being sold into slavery by his brothers, and he is able to receive them once again in love.

It is such an emotional scene...and so complex. Joseph hears the words of his father, whom he loved, and who loved him a bit too much. It provokes compassion and joy in Joseph, and then there is this culminating scene where Joseph weeps in front of them and then they’re all like “I’m not crying, you’re crying,” and they present themselves as slaves at Joseph’s feet, but Joseph doesn’t want that. He wants his brothers back, not slaves. And somehow Joseph is able to see in all that has happened the hand of God leading them back to one another, restoring them as a family.

There are many things Joseph’s story teaches us, things that even the Holderness family touches on, but one of the main points is that a family can only function if no one is keeping constant track of wrongs. Forgiveness has to wipe the slate clean on a regular basis. Openness towards reconciliation needs to be present all the time, like a default position on a computer program, like oxygen. Otherwise, it kind of stops being family or community. It becomes chaos.

I think this is largely what Jesus means when he explains to Peter and the other disciples that they are to forgive people not seven times but seventy-seven times. Jesus doesn’t literally mean to tally how many times you forgive someone for sinning and stop at seventy-seven. He’s being flippant with the number, turning the question back on Peter in a humorous way. Seventy-seven was kind of a way of saying, “don’t count occasions of rule-breaking and forgiving because

forgiveness isn't really able to be calculated. It's like he's saying be constantly gracious. Don't ignore wrongdoings, by any means, or the pain they cause, but be aware of your ability to unburden people from their trespasses. Don't be a Karen all the time, pointing out everyone's flaws in an unrelenting manner. Relationships are living and active and just as individuals need daily bread to survive, so do we need forgiveness and grace and mercy to make it each and every day. It's not just a matter of being nice and thoughtful. Being generous with mercy is a matter of giving people oxygen.

Then Jesus tells this fantastic parable to remind his disciples that they, too have been forgiven. It's not just a one-way street. Our default stance of grace towards other people is based on God's grace towards us. We have been loved and forgiven seventy-seven million times. Again, we're not supposed to count.

The parable tells the story of a slave who owes an exorbitant amount of money to his king. Ten thousand talents may not mean anything to you or me, but historians say this would have been equivalent in Jesus' time to about 200,000 year's worth of wages. Scholars tell us that not even King Herod would have had that much in his treasury. How this slave ran up that kind of bill we are not supposed to be too concerned about. The point would be that there is no way he could ever pay it off. When the king makes preparations to sell him and his family, the slave falls down in humility and begs for time to pay it off. And instead of getting a deadline extension, which is what he asks for, he gets complete forgiveness of the debt. The king just lets him go!

But then this slave immediately turns around and comes across a buddy who owes him a much smaller amount. A hundred denarii was equal to about four months of wages, so a very doable debt. He grabs the guy by the throat and demands the money. What happens when you grab a person by the throat? You cut off their oxygen.

The guy pleads and pleads, just in the same manner the first guy had done before the king, but instead of being merciful, instead of cancelling the debt, he throws the poor guy in prison. Word gets back to the king about this, and I suppose that most kings probably wouldn't really get involved in their many slaves' various private financial affairs. I suppose most kings really wouldn't care about who owed who money or who was doing what to which person. I suppose most kings would have bigger fish to fry. But this isn't most kings. This king doesn't want this kind of stuff going on in his kingdom. This king has a higher vision for how things roll, and he finds that unmerciful slave and calls him wicked, throws him in jail and has him tortured until he pays the 200,000 years worth of wages.

And the bit about the torture may freak us out a bit, because torture is terrible and inhuman, but on some level. And yet. Don't we end up truly torturing ourselves when we withhold forgiveness and shut the door on true reconciliation? I think that's what Joseph understood. Receiving back his brothers only as slaves, as subjects, would just prolong the torture of everything he'd been through. Doing the hard, often emotional work of listening and restoring frees the person who does it almost more than those who are forgiven.

I came across an article recently about the infants and children of Nicolai Ceausescu's Romania from the 1980s. In one of the most heartbreaking and disgusting eras of human history, Nicolai Ceausescu, the Romanian dictator, ordered hundreds of thousands of children to be born to appease his fascist fantasies, but because the country was too poor to raise them all in homes, many were placed in orphanages where they rarely received any physical or nurturing care. They would cry and no one would comfort them. They would get scared and no one would hold them. They wouldn't be able to fall asleep and no one would rock them.

Tragically, we know now this did irreparable damage to the way those children's brains processed fear and hope, and now many of them are adults (which is what the article was about)

and they are unable to function at a normal level in society. They find it difficult to build healthy relationships with others.

It is such an awful thing to ponder and talk about, because it still happens on a smaller scale today in many places. But here's what it teaches us: Humans, even at birth, it turns out, are able to process mercy and grace. We begin our lives as creatures that receive—receive care, receive warmth, receive joy and security. We do nothing to deserve it, but our survival depends on it. And the survival of others depends on our willingness to share those things. It is oxygen for God's people, and God started it all rolling in Jesus, his Son, that different kind of king who gives up everything, who gets thrown in prison, who gets tortured to death, in order to keep that cycle of forgiveness and reconciliation going. Forever.

We never outgrow this. We never outgrow the need to hear and know we are set free from the brokenness that burdens us. We never get too old to hear that former enemies can be restored to us as siblings. We never get too old to receive the news that our debts against God have been cancelled. Across the board. It makes us live.

Sometimes I look online and at the news, especially in our current political situation, and think we are all just holding each other by the throat. How dare you think this, Trump-supporter? How dare you support that, Black Lives Matter activist? And we lay into each other primarily to get a pound of flesh and inflict a mortal wound on the other side because how could they, right? How could they!? And we want to deprive them of oxygen.

It sounds a bit idealistic, perhaps, but maybe Jesus says it's time to stand back and think of the human family, especially before we post that cynical meme on social media or before we turn on that favorite news channel. Maybe Jesus tells us this parable again right now in hopes we realize we've been given to one another as brothers and sisters.

And maybe we might hear in this lesson the fact our whole existence is dependent on the grace given to us by God through other people. Certainly we don't ignore the wrongs we've inflicted on one another, certainly we take seriously the real damage that lasts, but certainly it is time to remember, for the love of God, that our default position, as forgiven and loved children of God, is not attack and torture, but listen and embrace. Our default position is grace because that's what God has lavished on us.

As Paul says to the Romans, "We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves." My decisions don't just impact me. I'm bound to you and you are bound to that guy over there. Like Joseph and his brothers. We are the Lord's, whether we live or whether we die. And his is the hidden hand of God, leading us back to each other.

Are we the Holderness Family, always able to poke fun at our foibles? Nah, but we are the Holding Us family, for God holds us in his care and in his steadfast love forever, never repaying us according to our iniquities, holding us from the moment we're born seeking love and warmth to the moment we die and find eternal love receives us.

Seventy-seven times, as if we're counting.

Thanks be to God!

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