

15th Sunday after Pentecost (L24A), September 13, 2020
Matthew 18:21-35, Genesis 50:15-21, Romans 14:1-12

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Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ. This past Friday we observed the 19th anniversary of the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and an attempted attack on the White House. It was a horrendous act of violence that killed thousands of people, injured thousands more, and had a lasting impact on our national psyche. How do we think about events like 9/11 in light of today's readings on forgiveness? Can forgiveness ever be part of our conversation or our commemorations in relation to those attacks?

That is an important question that does not have an easy answer. Eighty-one years ago, right around now, the Germans under Adolph Hitler invaded Poland and began World War II. They committed unspeakable atrocities in the years that followed, including most famously the wholesale slaughter of six million Jews throughout Europe just because they were Jews. After the war there were trials of war criminals, some executions, and some imprisonments. Fast forward to now, four score years later, and the Germans, the French, the British, and the Americans are all allies. And even Germany and Poland get along pretty well. Does that mean they've forgiven each other? I'm not sure that's exactly the way to put it. In some instances, maybe so. The Taizé community in France became known in the post-war years for its ministry to German prisoners of war, as a result of which it later became a center of the peace movement. But in other cases there are still some hard feelings even this many years later. Mostly what has happened is that the generation that fought World War II has almost all died, and it has been up their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren to continue the work of repairing the damage and rebuilding good relations. Maybe something like that could happen down the road with the descendants of those involved in the 9/11 attacks. I will not be alive in 60 years to find out, but maybe some of our youngsters will.

As important and as complicated as this question of forgiving our enemies is, it is not what is at stake in our readings today. All three of our readings this morning address our relationships not with our enemies, but with those we are closest to: our families and our communities of faith.

The first reading is the end of the Joseph story, which takes up the last quarter of the book of Genesis. You remember how it starts. Joseph is the second youngest son of his father, Jacob, a.k.a. Israel. Joseph gets special treatment from his father, and he annoys his older brothers so much that they decide to stage his death and sell him off into slavery in Egypt. And then in Egypt he rises to a position of great power in the Pharaoh's court, thanks to his God-given gift of interpreting dreams. In the end, the whole family comes down to Egypt to escape the famine in the land of Canaan. After Jacob dies, the brothers assume Joseph will take his revenge on them and beg his forgiveness. Joseph's reaction is telling. He will not put himself in the place of God. Vengeance is God's prerogative. "Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord" is the famous quote from Deuteronomy. But it's embedded in Joseph's thinking here, and we heard Paul bring it up last week in our reading from Romans. For Joseph to take revenge on his brothers, however satisfying that might be as an end to a Hollywood blockbuster, would be to perpetuate evil and undermine the good that God is continually working to bring out of evil. Because, as Paul alluded to last week, evil is not defeated by more evil.

Our Gospel reading today also picks up the theme of forgiveness and reconciliation in the community from last week's reading. On hearing about the pains Jesus wants us to take to be reconciled with our brothers and sisters in faith, Peter today is concerned with the limits. How

much do I have to put up with? I don't want to be taken advantage of. Now I think that's pretty rich coming from Peter, don't you? If Jesus were feeling snarky, he might ask the same thing of Peter. How many times do you want me to forgive you, Peter? I think I'm already past seven, and you haven't even gotten to the big one yet, where you deny that you even know me. What should be *my* limit? Instead, Jesus tells the parable of the forgiving king and the unforgiving servant to illustrate the same point. The amounts of the debt in the story make that clear. The king forgives the equivalent of billions of dollars, while the servant is unwilling to forgive thousands. Jesus' ultimate point to Peter, and by extension to all of us, is that keeping score will not work out in our favor. But not only that, it is a threat to our relationships with one another. Forgiveness is not just a formality, but a matter of the heart.

And that's where Paul is going in our continuation of last week's reading from Romans. The purpose of our life together in our community of faith is to support one another in our relationship with God, not to establish a pecking order among ourselves of who is the most righteous, or who has the best taste in music, or liturgy, or the color of the carpet in the narthex. Yes, I heard about that. But don't worry, I don't know names or details. And I don't want to know. God doesn't care about the details of our petty differences with one another. God does care, though, that we *have* those petty differences, and wants us to focus instead on what really matters: God's love and forgiveness for us in Jesus Christ, and our task of being instruments of that love and forgiveness to one another. Our quarrels and our jockeying for status in the church, in our families, and our relationships with others in our daily lives are not just distractions, they are obstacles to God's work in the world that just continues to rack up our debt, to mix the images of our readings today. How do you rack up billions of dollars in debt, figuratively speaking? A little at a time, day in and day out.

Jesus comes to break that cycle that we cannot possibly break out of on our own. Jesus' demands forgiveness from the heart, and we can barely manage superficial forgiveness for show – on our good days. Forgiving from the heart is what God does for us in Jesus Christ. If we are to have any chance at that in our own relationships with other, beginning with our closest relationship in our families and in the family of God, it will only be by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. It will only be by recognizing the depth of our own debt to God and the magnitude of God's love and forgiveness for us. But when that happens, when by God's grace that good news sinks in and takes hold of us, our lives and our relationships are transformed, beginning with our closest relationships and spilling out into the world the God has so loved in Jesus Christ. And who knows how far that transformation might go?

Sisters and brothers in Christ, God is at work in the world overcoming evil with good. Take that promise seriously, and take heart in it, so that you might be an agent and a conduit of that good work in all areas of your life. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.