

15 Pentecost, Proper 19, Yr. A
September 17, 2017
Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35

Well, there's no mistaking the theme of this morning's Scriptures. It's all about forgiveness. So, I'd like to start with that and then move a bit deeper, going beyond forgiveness to the idea of repentance, using the Genesis reading. I've got a couple of clichés for the two parts of this sermon. The first one is: to err is human; to forgive, divine.

I think that when we hear about an act of forgiveness following some horrible atrocity, we know exactly what that saying means. Who can forget standing in awe of those Amish parents whose daughters were killed, or of the black community in Charleston when that young white man interrupted their Bible study with gunfire, killing many of their friends and neighbors who had been peaceably gathered to study the word of God? And who among us doesn't wonder if we'd ever be able to do the same. That kind of forgiveness does, indeed, seem divine.

I think it's particularly interesting that these scriptures on forgiveness occur close to 9/11 because that challenges us at the deepest level. It raises questions about enemies, about loving them, and about what that would look like. Matthew's gospel is a wee bit easier, however, because he's writing about the need to forgive people within your own Christian community. You'll remember that Paul and the rest of the early Christians really thought that Jesus' return to earth was imminent. By the time Matthew is writing, it's become pretty obvious that that isn't going to happen and so Jesus' followers need to address how to live in the world. They aren't going to get whisked out up to heaven; instead, they're going to have to figure out how to live out Jesus' message in the world, starting with their own community. Last week, the Gospel was about how to handle a dispute. This week it's about forgiveness. And, again, Matthew is primarily concerned about the need for forgiveness within the community. He knows that hurts and misunderstandings will occur and, if not dealt with, they can fester and ultimately tear a community apart.

So, some words then, about forgiveness. It's a bit easier to say what forgiveness is not, I think. It's NOT saying that what was done wasn't wrong or didn't hurt. It's NOT saying that what happened was OK. It doesn't mean forgetting what happened. It doesn't mean becoming some kind of door mat. It's not the same as reconciliation, because forgiveness is unilateral. I can forgive someone without that person ever having asked for forgiveness, or expressing any kind of remorse, or trying to make amends in some way. The Greek word used means "to release from your grasp." And that says it all, because it's about YOU, as the one who was wronged, being able to let it go, freeing yourself from being tied in knots about what happened, freeing yourself from the desire for revenge. It's not easy and often requires prayer that asks that you be given the ability to forgive. Roger said, from a psychologist's point of view, it may be that it will require a number of "rehearsals" allowing for the emotional adjustment necessary to reach the point at which you can let it all go. Freeing up your "head space" is how he phrased it.

Reconciliation is different because it's two-sided and requires that there be an acknowledgement of wrong-doing, as well as an expression of remorse and the making of amends. You don't have control over reconciliation, but you do have control over forgiveness.

And that brings me to the second part of what I'd like us to consider. My cliché here is about not judging someone until you've walked a mile in his moccasins. Or more elegantly phrased, from the Jewish Mishnah, DO NOT JUDGE YOUR FELLOW UNTIL YOU HAVE BEEN IN HIS PLACE. The section of Paul's letter that we heard certainly zeroes in on this, on our all-too-human tendency to judge others, whether in matters trivial or serious. WHO ARE YOU, Paul says, TO PASS JUDGMENT ON SERVANTS OF ANOTHER. Because, he points out, we are all servants of the Lord, the one to whom we're accountable.

Here I'd like to look at the Joseph story in Genesis. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, to whom I'm indebted for this analysis, points out that no other narrative in the entire Pentateuch is as long as this story and he argues that almost the entire book of Genesis, beginning with the murder of Abel by Cain is focused on the subject of how brothers learn what it means to resolve conflict, to forgive, to be reconciled to one another and to live in peace. If you look at Genesis, it seems creating a universe was easy; it's done in a single chapter. But creating loving human relationships are much more difficult – it takes the rest of the book to accomplish that. We have just the last part of the story in which we hear Joseph forgiving his brothers, but I think it helps to review the whole story, which we don't get in the lectionary. That's too bad because it's a powerful story. You all know the first part, that Jacob was married to Leah and Rachel and that he loved Rachel the best. Leah was the mother of all his sons except for Joseph and Benjamin and, presumably because he loved their mother best, he loved those two boys best as well. His affection and favoritism for Joseph was shown by the many-colored coat that he gave him.

As the story goes along, Joseph is sent out to where his brothers are with the flocks. They see him coming from a distance, probably because of that wonderful coat. Sacks points out that they don't see HIS FACE, they don't see him as a person; instead they see him as a threat. They talk about killing him and then decide that they'll just throw him in a cistern. Ultimately Judah suggests that they sell him into slavery in Egypt. Joseph's stay in Egypt has its ups and downs but when he explains the Pharaoh's dream, which predicts seven years of bounty followed by seven years of famine, he's appointed as the second-in-command. The famine occurs as he predicted, requiring his brothers journey to Egypt for food. Joseph recognizes them and accuses them of being spies. He insists that they go back and bring their youngest brother, Benjamin. They do, they come back, get the grain they need and leave. They haven't gone very far when they're stopped by a court official who accuses them of stealing a goblet. The luggage is searched and, sure enough, the goblet is found – in Benjamin's pack. They go back to Joseph and tell him that they're willing to be his slaves. Joseph responds by saying, "No, only the one who had the goblet, Benjamin." At this point, Judah makes a speech in which he says that he can't go home without Benjamin which would break their father's heart all over again. And he offers himself in Benjamin's place. Let me be your slave, let the child go free, he says. At this point, Joseph tells his brothers who he is and tells them that he forgives them.

It's a great story, but what's it about? This analysis appears in Sacks' book about violence and religion. His thesis is that our problem is our "groupishness" which we need to survive, but which can mean that we're always tempted to divide into in and out groups, showing altruism towards the ins and hostility towards the outs. What happens in Genesis is that there's a role reversal between Joseph and his brothers. Sacks points out that that is the most profound moral experience we can undergo. We walk in another's shoes. What, for instance, would have happened to Crusaders in the Middle Ages or to a German in 1939 if they suddenly discovered that they were Jewish? Is there anything that could be more life-changing than finding yourself on the other side? So, to go back to the Joseph story, his brothers suspected him of being ambitious; now they learn what it is to be under suspicion. They sold him as a slave; now they face enslavement. They made their father grieve for a "lost" son; now they have to witness that grief again. They treated their brother as a stranger; now they must learn that this stranger is their brother.

Ultimately the story is also about repentance and about the moral change and growth that it can bring. None of us is perfect; we all sin. And when we do, then what? We know the answer: acknowledge the sin, express remorse, resolve to do better – all of which is what's meant by repentance. But the Jewish tradition has one other question. How do we know the repentance is genuine? We know, it's said, because there's a simple, demonstrable change in how we live. Repentance is real when you find yourself in the same situation but this time you act differently. The brothers have earlier expressed remorse but here, faced with the same situation of giving a favored son over to slavery they act differently. What we heard this morning is the reconciliation that results.

Perhaps the most fundamental fact about human consciousness is that I cannot feel someone else's pain. I can only feel my own. We can only truly understand from the inside. Joseph is educating his brothers in what it means to be the "other," the victim, so they'll understand what evil feels like, not as a perpetrator, but as a victim.

In these days when the hatred and fear of the "other" confront us on a daily basis, there's real message of hope here. If we can change, then the future isn't doomed to become a repeat of the past. And repentance is proof that change is possible. Sacks concludes by saying that if we can change ourselves, together we can change the world.

In this last passage, we hear Joseph reinterpret what has happened by saying that they intended it for evil, but God meant it for good. Perhaps that's one of the great gifts of religion – that it gives us a framework to reinterpret the world. We are being challenged these days to hang on to that religious framework. The din around us tells us that those different from us are NOT brothers and sisters, but are threats, plain and simple. There are all kinds of anti-Christian messages: that greed is good, that the market rules, that money is all that matters, that whites are somehow better than everyone else, that the natural world is there for us to pillage, that the vulnerable deserve their fate. We're experiencing what one theologian called the "slow creep of hate." But the Christian message is that we can put ourselves in another's shoes, we can learn, we can forgive, we can love. Much depends on it. Amen.

