

## THE WAY OF FORGIVENESS

Sermon Text: Genesis 50:15-21

Dear Fellow Redeemed, "To err is human, to forgive is not our policy."  
That's what it said on a sign above the door of a lending institution.

In times past, as well as times present, "to forgive" is not the policy- not the way natural man chooses. The way of the natural, unregenerate person is to call in your markers, to hold a grudge, to break off relations, to seek revenge. To forgive is seldom anyone's way, mostly because it's such a difficult thing to do.

Not long ago a woman told Ann Landers: "I haven't spoken to my brother's wife in seven years. It would take the entire newspaper to tell my story, so I'll just say that she did me such incredible dirt that I will never be able to forgive her."

Why is forgiving such a hard thing to do?

Partly because real forgiveness involves much more than simply mouthing the words, "I forgive you." It also involves corresponding action.

Forgiveness is the subject of today's sermon. For, as Christians coming to the Lord's Table for forgiveness today, we want to be assured that we have it. We also want to extend that hand of forgiveness to our fellow men.

Our text for today will help us to review:

### THE WAY OF FORGIVENESS

- I. It is a way that doesn't come naturally.
- II. It is God's way toward us.
- III. Let it be our way toward others.

Forgiveness is a way that doesn't come naturally to human beings. That's what makes our account for today so interesting. For the story of Joseph forgiving his brothers really is rather extraordinary, when you think about it.

Consider Joseph. A young man of the age of 17 or 18 arouses the hatred and jealousy of his brothers. He has the annoying habit of tattling on them. To make matters worse, he is the favorite son of their father Jacob, a fact that does not sit well with the rest of the boys. To top it off, he's a dreamer. He dreams that one day his father and brothers will bow down before him and he tells his brother about this dream.

Hatred and envy sets in. It becomes so intense that a plan is contrived for his murder. Joseph would be dropped into a desert pit and left to die. Cooler heads prevail, however, when an Ishmaelite caravan happens along, and the brothers rid themselves of Joseph by selling him as a slave for twenty pieces of silver. Eventually he winds up in Egypt serving in the house of a rich man named Potiphar. But then, just when things are looking up a bit for Joseph, more trouble. Joseph is forced to flee from the adulterous advances of Potiphar's wife. Potiphar's wife then falsely accuses Joseph of making unwanted advances towards her and when her husband hears the accusations, he has Joseph thrown into prison. There Joseph languishes - a forgotten man, destitute of family and friends.

Joseph was undoubtedly at the low point of his life, suffering untold pain and indignities. And why? As far as he could see, it was all because his brothers had done him dirt!

But, as always, God had a plan.

The Lord says in Isaiah:

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.” Isaiah 55:8-9

God's hand, as always, is at the controls... even in a believer's darkest moments. What a comfort this ought to be for us in our daily lives.

Through a strange sequence of events Joseph is given the wisdom to interpret several of the Pharaoh's dreams. He predicts seven years of plenty followed by another seven of famine. For this he is promoted to second in command in all of Egypt.

What a remarkable turn of events!

It is here that our story becomes especially interesting.

Joseph's brothers are suffering from the famine. They learn about the availability of food in Egypt, and so journey to Egypt to buy food. They make several trips, not knowing Joseph is their benefactor.

Finally Joseph reveals to them his true identity.

Now consider this: what a delicious moment that could have been for Joseph!

Now the tables are turned, aren't they?

Now, finally, Joseph has the upper hand. Now he can do something about the years of forced separation from home and family. Now he's in a position to repay his brothers for all those months he spent in prison and all the awful things he went through -- all because his brothers had betrayed him.

Is it any wonder then that after their father is dead, the brothers are frightened of Joseph? "Perhaps Joseph will hate us," they say to each other fearfully, "and may now actually repay us for all the evil which we did to him."

All the facts are known. They are without excuse. Deception won't help them.

In fact, there's really only one course left open to them. What is it?

They must beg for Joseph's mercy and forgiveness.

So, they took this last desperate chance.

First they sent messengers to him, then appeared in person saying, "Please forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father. Behold, we are your servants."

Now was Joseph up to that?

Could he put the past behind him and forgive his brothers? Or would he seize the moment and deliver a crushing blow of revenge upon those who had sinned against him?

What would you have done?

Forgiveness is a way, remember, that doesn't come naturally.

In the year 69 AD a young senator from Rome named Julius Caesar was captured by sea pirates.

While a captive in their camp he taught them, played their games with them, read to them, and for a while lived a comfortable life among his captors.

It is said, however, that Caesar - "with a smile" - swore to the pirates that once he was set free, he would have them all crucified.

Well, turnabout is fair play, is it not? At least to the unbelieving Caesar it was. For Caesar did manage to escape, and lived to see the pirates captured and crucified.

However, to prove he was "merciful in avenging his wrongs," he ordered his men to cut the pirates' throats before their bodies were hung on the crosses.

**That** was **Caesar's** method of showing "mercy and Forgiveness".

Now, what of Joseph? The moment was ripe for Joseph to exact sweet revenge upon his brothers!

He could have stared his brothers in the face and gloated about how now it was his turn to repay his brothers for their evil. After all, all the power was with **him** now.

He might have had them all tortured and put to death right then and there.

Or he might have simply said to them, "What is it to me if you and your children starve to death?" and sent them back to Canaan empty handed to die a slow agonizing death....

But, listen to what he actually says, "Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. Now therefore fear ye not; I will nourish you, and your little ones."

And note the concluding remark of our text: "And he comforted them and spake kindly to them."

It was Forgiveness of the highest order.

Not just words, but action!

Does any of this sound familiar to you?

It should, because Forgiveness is God's Way toward us.

You and I have received, by the Grace of God, just that kind of Forgiveness.

Our situation is quite similar, when you really think about it, to that of Joseph's wicked brothers.

To our God, to the Very One who created us, we have dealt **unbelievable** dirt.

We've betrayed Him.

According to our sinful human nature, we've hated Him and been His self-proclaimed enemies.

Even in our lives as Christians, we've often disobeyed His will, sinned against Him.

We've used His name carelessly.

We've been complaining, ungrateful, unfaithful, and untrusting.

Indeed we - you and I - share a part in the blood guiltiness that sent God's Son down that road of unimaginable suffering and sorrow - the road to the Cross of Calvary.

We - you and I - put those heavy nails through his hands and feet with each one of our sinful thoughts, words and deeds, a terrible hammer strike.

Of all this we're guilty. God has us, literally "dead to rights".

None of these facts are in dispute. And not one of us has an excuse.

What other option do we have, except to plead for God's mercy and Forgiveness?

To get on our knees and cry out, "Behold, we are your servants".

But is God up to that?

You might well ask yourself: Will not God repay evil with evil?

That after all would be "turn-about" fair and just, would it not – on account of our many sins?

Can God possibly put all my terrible sins and corruption out of His sight and forgive me?

Thanks be to God, He can do it, and He has done it!

He has already done it for the whole world in Christ!

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved." John 3:16,17.

A few moments ago we noted how immeasurable high the wisdom of God is.

Well, there's something else that's sky-high, and that's God's Forgiveness.

The psalmist says,

"For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us. As a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear Him. (Ps 103:11-13)

God's forgiveness is the true kind. It's more than just words. He acted it out, thoroughly.

Though He was sorely tempted to sin, just as you and I are in this world, yet He lived a sinless life, fulfilling the Law of God perfectly in our place.

On the dusty streets of Palestine our Lord Jesus exercised His Forgiveness toward us.

He carried it to the extreme limit: suffering torture, death, and the pangs of hell itself – complete and utter separation from God, in order to redeem us, in order to reconcile us and bring us into peace with God.

And so it came about, just as Isaiah prophesied:

“He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:5)

The brothers of Joseph expected revenge. They got mercy.

They waited for retribution. He extended the hand of reconciliation and the spirit of peace.

Why? It was undeserved compassion, pure and simple.

When Joseph heard his brothers' words of pleading, he was moved with loving compassion toward them.

So much so that he couldn't hold back his tears. His heart was overcome with godly mercy.

So it is with the heart of our Lord Jesus. So it was that He spoke to the sinful Zacchaeus, “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house.”

So it was that He spoke to the adulterous woman, “Neither do I condemn you.”

So it was that He prayed for the very people who were nailing Him to the cross, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

And likewise too, our Lord has spoken to you and me!

"Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven you!"

Forgiveness does not flow from arrogant, pride-filled hearts, but from hearts crushed by the tragedy of their sins, and from hearts melted by the simple and pure beauty of the Gospel.

To be a genuine forgiver, you have to have tasted the sweetness of God's Forgiveness yourself, first hand.

You and I have enjoyed God's gracious Way of Forgiveness.

Let it also be our way to forgive others.

They're out there, you know -- the people who need our forgiveness. Whether they know it or not. Whether they even want it or not!

In our homes, at work, at church. Even in our most casual acquaintances. The opportunity to forgive presents itself to us every day.

Forgiven we are – **Forgiving** may we be!

There is an old proverb about revenge -"Revenge," it says, "is a dish best eaten cold."

To us Christians, however, it is a dish best not eaten at all.

In fact, it is forbidden food to us! "'Vengeance is mine - I will repay,' saith the Lord."

Now, it's not easy for us to forgive the nasty lie, the cutting remark, the word aimed at scarring our reputation. No, our natural inclination is to get "pay-back".

But God, who daily forgives the most horrible sins we commit against Him, also gives us the power as His Children to daily forgive those who have sinned against us.

Truly, "To err is human, and to forgive..." well, you can forgive only by finding strength to do so in the Forgiveness Jesus freely offers and gives to you in the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, with the guiding help of your Holy Spirit, make us to be ever of humble mind and heart so that "to forgive" can and will indeed be **our way** through this life. In Jesus' Name! AMEN.