

Sermon Luke 6:27-38

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany

February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2025

The story of Joseph and his brothers, which we find at the end of the book of Genesis, is my favorite story of what we call the Old Testament – because it’s a really good story! I just did the Reader’s Digest version during the children’s sermon, but the long version has everything: intrigue, betrayal, melodrama, even sex – and then, of course, an ending with a twist. I recommend that you read the entire story at your own leisure; it begins in chapter 37 in the book of Genesis.

So after all the adventures – and misadventures – Joseph has to go through, with his brothers, and then in Egypt – because not everything goes well for him there, he is even thrown in prison at some point on false charges, before he ascends to greatness – the story comes to its dramatic climax.

Here we have the big showdown between Joseph and his brothers who betrayed him out of jealousy, even going so far as to leave him in a dried-up well to die, which basically is murder. Joseph now has their fate in his powerful hands. And something unexpected and shocking happens – here’s the twist: Joseph forgives them. And he reasons, ‘God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God.’

Wow! It takes a lot of wisdom and growth to have that kind of attitude, after all the brothers did to Joseph, don’t you think?

Jacob, aka Israel – and his house are preserved as it is God’s plan. But I still think it is quite amazing that Joseph is able to forgive his brothers and that he chooses to have mercy.

I think part of the reason why this is such a good story is this rather unexpected ending, this surprise element. For how many stories have we heard where there is a different ending, and sweet revenge is taken? There is a whole movie genre about that – John Wick, anyone? And, sadly and alarmingly, a lot of national politics are driven by retribution and revenge right now as well.

Mercy is not something that comes naturally to human beings. Mercy is a concept that even seems threatening – even folks who consider themselves to be Christian in this country can’t deal with it, and see it as a ‘woke’, and far-left concept – even

though it is a concept we find throughout our Holy Scriptures. God wants us to be merciful. And Jesus' teachings emphasize that, over and over.

In general: forgiveness is hard. Even with those we love most – parents, spouses, children, friends – we may forgive them when they hurt us, but usually there is still a sting somewhere, a memory that just won't go away, something that catches up with us, preferably during an argument. You always...! You never...! Or it comes up in therapy. Forgive and forget? If only it was that easy!

Not only is it hard to forgive – but it is rather hard to be forgiven as well.

Let me tell you another story: back in Germany and back in the day, I had a high school sweetheart. He was very kind and a great guy. I was a typical hormonal and confused and sometimes mean teenage girl, and I took sometimes took advantage of my gentle boyfriend. I hurt him, often on purpose, and when we broke up, after more than five years together, I made sure to make it real hard on him. And that's something I am not proud of, let me tell you.

Now for me, there was some unfinished business about this relationship, even as I got married and had my children. So about eight years after we split, I found him via this rather new invention: the internet. I sent him an email, asking him for forgiveness for how I had treated him. And he was kind enough to write back: Yes, you hurt me. I forgive you.

Now something very interesting happened: I wasn't happy with that response. It bugged me. And as I reflected on it, I figured out why: I had hoped for a response like, 'Oh, don't worry, it wasn't so bad.' Instead, he held up a mirror, and the reflection I saw was not what I wanted to see. I had to own up to my mistakes. I had to truly acknowledge my shortcomings. And that was tough. It took me a while to accept my high school sweetheart's forgiveness. It definitely took some growth and maturity before I was able to appreciate it. Today, I am grateful for it.

This taught me something about God's mercy and forgiveness that 7 years of seminary training didn't do: that God's mercy, God's forgiveness are not a light-hearted absolution, ah, well, it's not so bad, my dear child. God's forgiveness is not a blank check for us to just continue in our errant ways and to make the same mistakes over and over again. If it was that easy, Jesus Christ would not have taken this radical step of dying on the cross.

As we seek forgiveness, we have to be honest with ourselves. As we seek true forgiveness, we need to be open to transformation. That's what in church jargon

we call repentance – we will hear a lot about that in the upcoming Lenten season. And to be forgiven and repentance are just as hard as to forgive, if not harder.

So as Jesus in today's gospel lesson talks about loving the enemy, blessing the one who means harm, and offering the other cheek - in short, as he talks about being merciful, just as the heavenly Father is merciful - he is not only challenging those who listen to him to take on the hard task of forgiving. There is a flip side to forgiveness: those who are at the receiving end of this mercy will be surprised and maybe even shocked - just as Joseph's brothers were shocked by his mercy. Those who are at the receiving end of mercy are challenged as well – challenged to think about their ways, challenged to be honest with themselves, challenged to admit their mistakes, challenged to change their ways.

And so mercy is a two-edged sword. It cuts both ways.

And I would say that there is a correlation between the willingness and ability of forgiving and being forgiven. Only a person who is willing to acknowledge their mistakes and be forgiven is able to truly forgive. For forgiveness without the confession of the need to be forgiven becomes a magnanimous, even arrogant, gesture, meant to demean, control and gaslight. And so I am not only concerned and alarmed by the inability or unwillingness of so many, and especially those currently in power, to forgive - but also about the overall tendency to cling to self-righteousness, and the inability and unwillingness of many, and especially those in power, to admit mistakes and seek forgiveness.

God is insistent on mercy, and for a good reason. Because God's endgame is not a society where the wealthiest and most conniving are at the top and have the power of manipulating anything and anyone. God's endgame is not a society where most struggle and have to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, as the system is making it nearly impossible for them to do so. God's endgame is not a society that is ruled by social Darwinism. God's endgame is the kingdom of heaven, which is the total opposite: a realm where all live without any need, a realm where no one needs to hurt or harm anyone, a realm of eternal life to the fullest for all - a realm of shalom, God's peace.

Without mercy and the hard work of extending and receiving forgiveness, the kingdom of God remains but a utopia, something that is too good to ever become true.

Friends, we live in quite unforgiving times – in times, when people don't really want to be forgiven but rather be affirmed in their often errant ways, in times when it's all about self-justification and retribution.

And in these times, God continues to challenge us: to be merciful in a world that mostly isn't. To model humility and honesty with ourselves in a world in which many can't or don't want to acknowledge their mistakes. To show what it means to be merciful – and to graciously receive mercy. To bring a glimpse of God's kingdom into this world – and to challenge others to live into the same vision.

Amen