

Next week I'll offer the 1st of 4 sermons on thankfulness,
something I thought about every day
when I was driving cross-country this summer.

Today, though, let's talk about forgiving people.

All 3 readings are about forgiving people
and each reading gives us a different reason to forgive.

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In Romans, St. Paul reminds us that to preserve unity
we need to forgive each other for all the small stuff in life,
all the little ways we bump into each other in day to day life.

Paul is writing to a church made up of people from all kinds of
different backgrounds, religious practices, values, and cultures.
All they really have in common...is Jesus.

So Paul tells them to let each person demonstrate their love for God
in their own way,
and not to get all worked up about whose way is better.

"Who are you to pass judgment on somebody else?" Paul says,
"Why do you despise your brother or sister?"

Paul is reminding us at Holy Trinity
to have a little more trust and a lot more forgiveness
for people who are trying to be faithful to God,
but do it in a way that seems wrongheaded to you,
or even in a way that might seem threatening to you.

That's because forgiving each other's differences
helps us avoid the temptation to divide ourselves.
And dividing ourselves is a **STRONG** temptation.

I think Paul would say we need to avoid dividing ourselves
over issues that are really important, but far away,
like when we assume the worst about somebody
based on what they think about the president,
or what they believe about Israel and Palestine.

And I think he would also warn us not to divide ourselves
over things that are closer to home
but where the stakes for those differences are incredibly low.

Things like making an enemy out of someone at work over some new policy.
Like students dividing themselves at school,
or even adults doing it there as faculty and administrators.

Or divisions at church over which ministry
gets more attention or more money or space.
Even at church sometimes we turn brothers and sisters in Christ
into rivals and enemies - and for what?

“Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?” Paul asks,
“Why do you despise your brother or sister?”

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So Paul is talking about the small stuff that hits close to home,
and maybe even the important stuff that’s far away,
but Genesis is talking about forgiving people for sins
that go much deeper,
about forgiving people who have really, truly hurt you.

You probably all know the basics of Joseph’s story in Genesis.
If you don’t, go home and read it this afternoon.
It’s my favorite story in the Old Testament,
and you can read it two ways.

You can read it with your kids as an adventure story,
or you can read it with adult eyes
as the story of trusting in God
in spite of humanity's darkest impulses.

In the adult way of reading,
you notice how Joseph's brothers attacked him for no reason,
how they beat him bloody and threw him in a hole to die,
and how the only reason they ended up letting him live
was so they could sell him to slave traders.

How as a slave Joseph worked his way into a good life
until he was falsely accused of rape and thrown into jail to rot.

It's not a stretch to see in Joseph the story of enslaved Africans
who were brought to this country,
or to see in Joseph a representative of all the boys and girls
who are trafficked and sold into slavery today,
a representative of all who are wrongly imprisoned
by a broken justice system.

Joseph forgiving his brothers is a not sweet story,
it's a challenge to any of you
who have known real abuse or betrayal in your life.

So let me ask this carefully,
knowing it might not be a hypothetical question for some of us:
If the tables get turned in your life...
if you end up like Joseph did with power over the people
who hurt you,
will you choose vengeance or forgiveness?

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This summer I watched a powerful TV show called Furious.

It's about two women,

one who was sexually abused and trafficked
and gets her revenge by murdering the people who hurt her,
and the other an FBI agent who is chasing her,
but is also the victim of abuse.

The show was hard to watch sometimes,

because it showed how sexual abuse damages the lives
of everyone it touches - the victim, the abuser,
even their family and friends.

At the end the FBI agent and the woman she's hunting
find themselves in a kind of alliance,

and the show ends with the FBI agent taking on her own version
of the killer's hunt for vengeance.

Like I said, it's a tough watch.

There's a part of you that roots for the killer to get her revenge
and that loves the idea of this FBI agent picking up
the mantle of vengeance against her own abusers.
And maybe if I had walked in their shoes I might do the same.

But as much as some part of us always hungers for vengeance,
there's no getting around the fact that revenge
IS NOT THE WAY of the children of God.

Vengeance is not the way of God's children.

Not for women. Not for men.

Not for any special group.

Not 3 years ago. Not 25 years ago.

Justice is our way. Truth-telling is our way. But not vengeance.

No matter how much we long for it, thirst for it,
even if we get rewarded and congratulated for it,
vengeance belongs only to God,
not to his sons or his daughters.

Joseph had the chance to get righteous revenge on his brothers,
but he chose instead to forgive them.

He chose that path because God had already brought him
through his darkest days -
brought him out of that hole, brought him out of that prison -
so when it came time for payback,
Joseph left that in God's hands, too.

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Peter asks Jesus how often we should forgive a brother or sister.
Jesus tells them a parable to explain
why there is no limit on forgiveness.

It's ironic that when I hear that parable my first reaction
is to be glad the unmerciful slave gets what's coming to him.

Ironic because the whole point of the parable
is that I AM THE UNMERCIFUL SLAVE.

I'm not watching the story from the sidelines
and I am definitely not the merciful king.
Like pretty much every person in the world,
I want mercy for my sins against others
and vengeance for everybody else's sins against me.

Jesus knows that each of us is capable of hurting others,
that in the right circumstances
each of us is willing to betray the people we love.

But what Jesus also knows and is trying to tell us in that parable
is that in spite of your willingness to hurt and betray,
God has already forgiven you,
has already showered you with mercy and forgiveness.

So we are to forgive others not because it's good for your blood pressure
or your mental health, even though it is.

No, you are to forgive others because Jesus has given his life for you,
has already saved you from the consequences
of your human brokenness,
our seemingly universal impulse to hurt and betray
the people we love.

You are to forgive others because Jesus gave his life
that you would be forgiven by God.

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2,000 years ago at the Last Supper,
and in every eucharistic celebration since,
Christ has welcomed the sinner, the betrayer,
the transgressor, even the abuser.

He has welcomed them just as he welcomes us today,
the latest generation of betrayers, sinners, abusers, and transgressors.
Jesus welcomes us in spite of all our sins and shortcomings.

Let all of us who try to follow Jesus
be much more willing to forgive than we are to seek revenge.

Amen.