

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

**"Make an end of family feuds"**

An offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city, and disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel" That was King Solomon's way of saying that family feuds are among the most painful things in life.

That's true isn't it? After all, if you get into it with your friends, you can take comfort that at least you don't have to live with them. If you don't like the way co-workers treat you, you can always find a different job.

But if you can't get along with your family, life will be a drag because you can't just change families. How many of you have a brother or sister who is not talking to each other?

It's been years. Or maybe, these family members don't have anything to do with you. They won't show up at a family reunion if you are there. Or maybe you remarried after a divorce, and you still have to see your Ex at family functions since you had children together.

If disagreements, harsh words, and even physical abuse have torn apart your family, the story of Joseph offers hope. Through Joseph's actions God teaches us how to end family feuds. He says we do this by forgiving what has been done, and by foreseeing what God has planned.

Joseph was one of twelve sons of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. As the firstborn of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel, Joseph was Daddy's favorite son. The other boys may have been able to put up with their father's favoritism but they couldn't deal with their brother's habit of bragging.

Joseph claimed to have received dreams in which his brothers and parents bowed down to him. The dreams were real, but so was the hatred Joseph's brothers felt for him.

One day when Joseph's brothers were taking care of their father's sheep, they spotted Joseph coming towards them. As they grumbled about him, their jealousy turned to murderous rage and before they knew it, they had hatched a plan to kill Joseph.

Thankfully two brothers, Reuben and Judah, intervened. They persuaded their brothers to sell Joseph into slavery instead. And so Joseph was sent off to Egypt while father Jacob was led to believe that his favorite son had been killed by a wild animal.

In Egypt, Joseph faithfully served the captain of the palace guard until he was falsely accused of sexual harassment. He was imprisoned and there he languished for over two years before Pharaoh turned to Joseph for help in interpreting his dreams.

With God's help, Joseph explained the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams and was elevated to second in command – a position he used to oversee Egypt's food distribution. It was under these circumstances that Joseph came face to face with his brothers once again.

Famine had forced Joseph's brothers to come to Egypt for food. When Joseph saw his brothers he recognized them immediately but they did not recognize Joseph. When Joseph did reveal his true identity, how do you think his brothers felt?

Do you think they were overjoyed to see him? Not at first. At first they were scared, for the brother they had hated and treated poorly now had the resource of the Egyptian army to take revenge.

Is that what Joseph had in mind for his brothers? No. Already at their first reunion Joseph put an end to the family feud when he forgave his brothers for what they had done.

Joseph didn't just tell them they were forgiven he showed it by caring for his brothers and their families by giving them food and places to live. Still his brothers weren't convinced.

They thought that this was all part of Joseph's plan to take revenge on them when they least expected it. And so when their father died years later, the brothers thought for sure the time had come for Joseph to exact his revenge.

Upon learning that his brothers still doubted his forgiveness, Joseph wept and then he said to them: "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?" (Genesis 50:19b) Joseph had no plans for revenge because he knew that only God had the right to do that.

Therefore when we take revenge, even if that's giving another the cold shoulder, we are playing God. Real forgiveness is relinquishing my right to get even and turning the person over to God. This is the heart of real forgiveness. You don't seek revenge.

The Bible says it like this in Romans 12:19, "Never avenge yourselves. Leave that to God. For He has said that He will repay those who deserve it." One day, God is going to have the last word. One day, God is going to settle the score. One day, God is going to right the wrong. One day, God is going to balance the ledger. So you let God settle the score.

You forgive so there can be peace in your heart and you can get on with your life, and you leave the justice part to God. Who can do a better job of justice? Who can do a better job of getting even? You or God? Who has more ways at His disposal of righting wrongs, you or God?

The starting point is to relinquish my right to get even. Remember, when we forgive, we are not saying it was ok what the person did to us. Rather, we are filing a quit claim on the lawsuit and turning the person over to God.

And when we forgive, we feel a lot better inside. No ulcers, or bitterness, that makes you an angry unhappy person. Friends, if you want to "play God," do it by forgiving.

When we forgive we do so at God's command and serve as God's voice of love (John 20:23). Forgive and end the feuds in your family. Forgive now. Don't wait for those who have hurt you to show that they are sorry for what they have done.

When Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive, did Jesus say, forgive only if they come to you and say they are sorry first. No. It was forgive now. Look at Joseph. He forgave his brothers before they even recognized him.

Extend forgiveness with a lifetime guarantee as Joseph did. Don't say to one another: "I forgive you but you better never do that again." You don't put conditions on forgiveness. Forgiveness is unconditional.

The kind of forgiveness Joseph extended is forgiveness God himself has shown us. God forgave us before we even asked for forgiveness. He forgave us by punishing his Son for our sins over two thousand years ago.

You see it wasn't just the Jewish leaders' jealousy of Jesus and Pilate's cowardliness that pinned our Savior to that cross. It was the weight of our desire for revenge against one another, and our refusal to let go of grudges that pushed the nails through his hands.

God not only forgave us for these and all sins before we asked, he forgives us forever. God's forgiveness comes with a lifetime, no, a forever-time guarantee because the one who died for our sins is more than human, he is God's Son from eternity so everything he accomplished for us extends into eternity.

Since our great debt of sin has been cancelled forever, Jesus calls us to do the same for one another. "But Pastor, you don't know the pain I've endured at the hands of family members. You don't know how hard it is to forgive them!"

You're right. I don't know the pain you've endured but I wonder if it compares to the pain Joseph experienced? His brothers hated him so much they almost killed him.

Sure they spared his life and sold him into slavery instead, but I wonder if there weren't days, like the time he was accused of sexual harassment and thrown into prison, when Joseph wished his brothers had done him in?

If you're bitter at family, know that Joseph had as much reason, if not more reason to be bitter against his family, but he wasn't. Why not? Joseph wasn't bitter because he saw the bigger picture.

He saw what God had worked in spite of his brothers' sins. Joseph explained to his brothers: "20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20).

God had given Joseph the faith to see how he had allowed everything in Joseph's life to happen so that he would be put in a position of authority to help his family and others through famine.

No, Joseph was not excusing his brothers' sin but he had come to see how God used those sins, and all the difficulties he had suffered as a result of them, for his benefit.

In the same way, God has promised to work everything in our lives, including painful experiences caused by the sins of family members, to work for our good (Romans 8:28).

Therefore we will end family feuds and keep from holding grudges when we foresee what God has planned for us in spite of our painful experiences. Although on this side of heaven we may never learn exactly how all the painful things we experience add up to our good, that's God's promise.

You've all heard the cliché "Forgive and forget". Isn't that nice? It sounds so sweet! Forgive and forget. The only problem is it's impossible to do. It's impossible.

In the first place, it's impossible to try to forget something. You can't try to forget anything. When you're trying to forget something, what are you focusing on? The very thing you want to forget. And whatever you focus on, you tend to move toward.

You can't try to forget anything. You have to try to put something in its place. I want to say, though, is that there's something better than forgetting. This will take you to a new level of spiritual maturity.

There's something better than forgetting. It's remembering but realizing how God can bring good even out of bad. You can't thank God for something you've forgotten.

Thank God that even though this terrible thing happened to me and it hurt a lot, I believe that God can turn it around and use it for good. Joseph resumed his relationship once again with his brothers.

He was fortunate. But we need to remember this doesn't always happen when we forgive someone. Forgiveness is not the same as restoring a relationship.

Some of you are afraid to forgive because you're afraid you're going to have to go back with that person. And you'll have to be their best friend again or you'll have to remarry them or whatever.

No, restoring relationship and forgiveness are two different things, the Bible teaches. Forgiveness is instant. Trust must be built over a long period of time. The Bible says that those are two different things. Forgiveness takes care of the damage done. It just lets the person off the hook. You let them go – scott free.

But it doesn't guarantee that the relationship will be fully restored. "An offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city, and disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel" No, family feuds aren't fun.

So why not end them? Forgive what has been done, and foresee the good God has planned in spite of the heartache you've experienced. End the feuds today, for God also said through Solomon: "There is joy for those who promote peace" Amen.