

## **SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON**

**Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost**

**September 13, 2020**

### **Psalm: Psalm 103:1–12**

1 Bless the LORD, O my soul,

and all that is within me,

bless his holy name!

2 Bless the LORD, O my soul,

and forget not all his benefits,

3 who forgives all your iniquity,

who heals all your diseases,

4 who redeems your life from the pit,

who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

5 who satisfies you with good

so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

6 The LORD works righteousness

and justice for all who are oppressed.

7 He made known his ways to Moses,

his acts to the people of Israel.

8 The LORD is merciful and gracious,

slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

9 He will not always chide,

nor will he keep his anger forever.

10 He does not deal with us according to our sins,

nor repay us according to our iniquities.

11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,

so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

12 as far as the east is from the west,

so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

### **Old Testament Reading: Genesis 50:15–21**

15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." 16 So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: 17 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you." ' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18 His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." 19 But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? 20 As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. 21 So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

### **EPISTLE: Romans 14:1–12**

#### **Do Not Pass Judgment on One Another**

14 As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. 2 One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. 4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

5 One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. 7 For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. 8 For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; 11 for it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.”

12 So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

#### **THE GOSPEL: Matthew 18:21–35**

**21** Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” **22** Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

**23** “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. **24** When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. **25** And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. **26** So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ **27** And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. **28** But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ **29** So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ **30** He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. **31** When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. **32** Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. **33** And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ **34** And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. **35** So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

## Sermon 35 – Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

### “The Keystone”

Genesis 50:15-21

Dear friends,

Happy endings are all well and good, but what happens when the ending isn't so clear-cut? Much of the Bible sometimes seems to resemble fiction, at least in the well-worn clichés of it. It isn't, it is the Word of God and therefore history, but the resemblance is still there. The reason for that is because our words have always been an echo of our lives, fiction is not so made-up that it doesn't resemble reality. The point of all this is to say that this Old Testament lesson is a nice demonstration of forgiveness, all the lessons have this principle at their heart, but this one is the most human exemplar. It shows rather than telling. This is the strength of the Old Testament as a whole, a powerful one for someone like me. Despite years of training and pushing to the contrary, I remain most of all a wannabe novelist. Stories resonate with me. Perhaps you're the same. This story is rather neat and tied up in a bow, ending in a sweet moment of family reconciliation. It's easy to see the arc of the whole thing, the purpose of it, what it was for. But what do you do with things like this when your life doesn't seem to have this neat little arc?

The story of Joseph, which I reviewed before writing this, is a humdinger. This is a last third of the book of Genesis, taking up just as much time as Israel or Abraham. This story has this nice, neat little ending, but it takes you to some seriously nasty places before you get there, and it is worth noting how every single person gets their time to be an absolute self-centered jerk in this story. Seriously. No one comes out of Joseph's story looking like a good person, except maybe Pharaoh, which is hilarious when you think that Exodus is next. Joseph himself starts off as the worst example of the spoiled youngest child you could imagine. Daddy Warbucks Israel loves Joseph, Joseph knows it, and Joseph uses this in an entirely predictable way: He uses it to torment his brothers to no end. They get sick of it, and so they decide to murder him, because this is the Middle East and

thousands of years ago. Reuben talks them down to enslaving him instead, which seems like a sideways step at best. Joseph is enslaved, eventually finds his way to Egypt, gets into cahoots with his master, gets framed for an attempted sexual assault, goes to prison again, then manages to fortune-tell his way into Pharaoh's court.

This is such a God story. This entire story is a whole bunch of people being people, self-obsessed, rotten, and very willing to kick down their neighbor if it gets them a step up. Everyone gets their turn showing just how awful human beings can be. And because of God's work, the end result of all this accumulated scummy behavior is this: Egypt can economically outlast a famine, and because of this, thousands if not tens of thousands of lives are saved, the future of God's people is secured, Israel gets reunited with his lost child, the many children of Israel all reconcile, and Joseph ends up second in command of Egypt. That is God. Every human being is engaged in nothing less than abject, total self-interest, and from all this constant dodging of blame, wrongful convictions, comes Israel's future as a nation and thousands of lives being saved from slow starvation by famine. It's amazing. Give it a read this week.

This is the end of the tale. Jacob is dead, the forefathers of the Israelite nation are safe in Egypt, Joseph is in charge. All the pieces are in place, but there's still one tiny teeny weeny little problem: Joseph's brothers tried to murder him. Joseph knows this. The brothers know this. **“15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.”** Joseph is large and in charge, and he has direct command of very skilled warriors with very big swords who can give Joseph any kind of revenge he can dream up. No one can tell Joseph no except Pharaoh. This man can mobilize Pharaoh's entire army without a single eyebrow being raised. Executing eleven little Hebrew men who were mean to you would be nothing. Joseph's household guard probably had a betting pool going as to when Joseph would finally snap and just gut them.

But he doesn't. When Joseph snaps, it is other way, but watch what happens first:

**6 So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: 17 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.'" And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father."** They're trying to get out of the fate that's been written for them. They're using their recently dead father to get Joseph to bury the hatchet. This is but the last example of that self-justification I was talking about. Hey Joseph, I know we tried to kill you, but Dad really really wouldn't want you to return the favor, now would he? It's pathetic. It's something so transparent that you only pull it out when it is obvious you are in a corner and you need to play every card in the deck to survive. If I was Joseph this would've been the last straw for me, but there is a reason I am not, and this is it.

He doesn't, and in this you see both Joseph's truest strength, but also God's subtlest work. **"Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18 His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." 19 But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? 20 As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. 21 So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones."** Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them." Every word here has meaning. If you're like me your cringe a little bit from how sacchrine and tidy this all is, but don't. The brothers present themselves as at Joseph's mercy. Their final card has been played, no more escape routes. Joseph stands in power over them, a power given by God, and they recognize this. This is repentance. Repentance, to our shame, often comes only when we are cornered, and this is a classic case. Joseph responds to his brother's repentance as God responds to ours, with glad tears a wholehearted acceptance. Not bad for a spoiled brat.

This is a changed man, shaped by God through tragedy and exercise of power both. Joseph is smart enough to know what's at stake here, and he has become that smart

through both the tragedies and the powers he exercises. As second-in-command of Egypt Joseph had to face the hard decisions of life and death. Egypt is still in the throes of a vicious famine that is gripping the nation. Moreover, Joseph understands what's been done. God saved the entire region, from the Horn of Africa to possibly 90% of the Middle East, from starving to death. He did this through attempted murder, enslavement, and two false accusations. Our God is a genius.

Joseph speaks true words at the end. He knows he is not God, despite repeatedly exercising the power of life and death in the earthly sense, Joseph has not let that power go to his head. He knows that revenge is God's, and he knows he is God's servant. He sees that God spared these selfish, jealous, bloodthirsty siblings of his for a reason, to save lives. To keep a region from sliding into anarchy and chaos. The effects are big-impact historical and wide-ranging.

Let me loop back to the question I asked you at the beginning. This is all nice, well and good, a good story to tell with a satisfying ending. Now think of your life, your tragedies. Think of this horrifically eventful age we have the misfortune of living in now. It's easy to close the book on the things that work out neatly, it's easy to make sense of something when it makes sense in the end. But what when it doesn't? What if Joseph had exercised his right of vengeance, drawn his sword, and slain his brothers right there? What if the good guy doesn't get the good girl, what if the bad guy goes free, the traitor doesn't get his comeuppance? Stories are easy. They're there to make sense, even when they're true. What if the cost doesn't measure up to the gain?

Remember Joseph's story. God orchestrates the salvation of an entire nation because he was a big-mouthed brat. Joseph is put in prison twice for reasons that we would consider ridiculous at best. He refuses the sexual advances of his master's wife, which is patently the right thing to do, and he gets jailed for it for attempted rape. Through this, God saved a region from starvation. He moved all the pieces to put the right player in the right place at the right time. Jesus was the same.

You are God's children, just as much as Israel, just as much as Joseph. Jesus has made you so, He has saved you and loves you. Joseph got dragged through a couple of nightmares, one which was admittedly self-inflicted, and yet God did not forsake Him. He did it slow, oh Lord have mercy did He ever do it slow. Both those jail periods of Joseph's were years at best. I'm sure there were times when Joseph was in prison thinking, "Is this really how you want things done, God?" Joseph sees the long game at the end, we may not, but that doesn't change the fact that the long game is God's game, and no one plays it better. He's not toying with you. He's not yanking you up and down on a string because He thinks its fun. He's not dangling salvation in front of you demanding you that fulfill some kind of to-do list that He refuses to show you. God is your shepherd, leading you as He led Joseph, through the valley, through the mountain, through lightning and tempest. God's promises endure, and He has promised that you are His child just as much as Joseph.

Amen