

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 19
Year A

Genesis 50:15-21
Psalm 103:1-13
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

Can we ever truly forgive a person? That might be the central question for our readings today. When Jacob dies, his sons are concerned that Joseph will now get back at them for selling him into slavery. They heard him say that he forgave them, but they had a feeling that it was not real. Perhaps he was just waiting for an opportunity to get his revenge. Thus, they concoct this story that their father had instructed them to say. Again, Joseph assures them that God used their action for the good of all. Still, Joseph pointed out that he would take care of them.

If I had been in the place of the brothers, I would have felt some uncertainty about Joseph's control over their lives. He really had the power to make or break them – to allow them to live or not. Thus, they were at his mercy, no matter what he might say. After what they had done to him, could they really be at peace? Could they trust him?

When Joseph's brothers asked for reconciliation, he responded by asking if he was in the place of God? He felt that, even though they had intended to do him harm, God used it for the good of all. Joseph was not in the business of granting absolution for their sin of plotting to kill him. God used their evil plot and transformed it into God's purposes.

As we read about Peter's question on forgiveness, we must remember what preceded his question. In the previous verses, Jesus has been discussing the process of reconciling a member of the church who had sinned against another member. Peter's question was not just about forgiveness, but forgiving someone enough to truly be reconciled with them. As we think about that in relation to the situation of the sons of Jacob in the reading from Genesis, we can see a parallel. In both cases, it is a matter of trust. Thus, when Peter asks his question, he is asking about perfect forgiveness by using the number seven. Perfect forgiveness implies the restoration of trust.

Why, then, does Jesus tell the parable about the unrepenting slave? How does that fit with forgiveness and reconciliation?

We can all agree that the numbers Jesus uses are hyperbole. Just as trying to forgive someone seventy times seven, owning ten thousand talents is ridiculous. A single talent would equal the wages of a laborer for fifteen years, so the amount Jesus states is truly astronomical. What is the point here?

In the parable, the king forgives an incredibly high amount, while the slave refuses to forgive his fellow slave a very small amount. The reaction of the king to this is the point – his forgiveness is conditional. If we cannot forgive even a fraction as generously as God forgives us, we do not

deserve God's forgiveness. Each time we say the Lord's Prayer, we are committing ourselves to the same level of forgiveness as God extends to us. "Forgive us our trespasses AS we forgive those who trespass against us."

We must accept forgiveness even as we must forgive. Accepting forgiveness can be as difficult as giving it. Joseph's brothers had a problem accepting the forgiveness he offered them. However, when we do accept that forgiveness from God, we can join the psalmist and proclaim, "Bless the Lord, o my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy Name." It is with great joy that we can express our thankfulness to God for that forgiveness.