

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 16
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
The power of forgiveness

¹⁵When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and will pay us back in full for all of the evil that we did to him."

¹⁶They sent the following message to Joseph: "Before he died your father commanded us, ¹⁷'You are to tell Joseph, "Please forgive the offense of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.'" Now, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father."

Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

¹⁸His brothers also came and fell down in front of him, and they said, "See now, we are your servants."

¹⁹Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring this to pass and to keep many people alive, as it is this day. ²¹Now therefore, do not be afraid. I will nourish you and your little ones." He comforted them and spoke to them in a kind way.

—Genesis 50:15-21

This morning we are going to touch on a subject that is hard to do: forgiving other people. We don't have the time to go through all the nuances of this topic. A few months ago, we spent three hours discussing this topic in a Bible study. I'm going to touch on it in 15 minutes today.

Forgiveness is hard. I've learned through experience that forgiveness doesn't come easily — especially when pain rips through the heart. Perhaps you've been betrayed or rejected. Perhaps someone has lied about you or taken advantage of you. Regardless of the details, suffering persists. Friends sometimes imply an issue is trivial by urging, "Just get over it." But deep wounds aren't trivial. What those friends don't grasp is it's not necessarily the seriousness of the offense but our reaction to it that makes the agony intense. The deeper the wound, the harder it is to let go of our pain and pardon the offender.

I wonder if that's how it was for Peter in the Gospel for today. I think Peter was hurting. I wonder if he was in a situation where someone had badly hurt him again and again. He wanted to know the limit. The teachers of that day told the people, "Three strikes and you're out." Peter thought, "Well, Jesus will be greater than that, but there has to be a limit. 7 times?"

But look at Jesus' answer. Jesus basically said, "Don't count. Keep forgiving. There is no limit to your forgiveness." That's hard to do. Isn't it? So, even though we aren't going to talk about all the nuances of this topic, I want to focus on a few points to help you forgive.

In Genesis 50, the last chapter in the book of Genesis, we step into a private family affair. Joseph's father, Jacob, had recently died. And Joseph's eleven brothers were afraid that Joseph was going to get his revenge on them.

Now, why would they think that? You may recall their family history. When Joseph was 17, he had a dream, and in that dream, his brothers were bowing down to him. He was ruling over them. At the same time, favoritism was taking place in the household. Joseph's dad, Jacob, favored him above all the other brothers. That led to some resentment and jealousy. It was really a messed up and dysfunctional family.

All that led to some shocking situations. At first the brothers wanted to kill Joseph. They wanted him gone. But instead of killing him, they ended up throwing him into an empty cistern, only to pull him out a little while later so they could sell him for 20 pieces of silver to some merchants. Those merchants later sold Joseph as a slave to a man named Potiphar. Now if that wasn't bad enough, these brothers then told dear old dad that they found Joseph's robe covered in blood, implying that some wild animal must have killed him.

Now, I have three younger brothers and a younger sister, and we have egos, and we compete, and we've gotten into fights, but I don't think I've ever been tempted to sell one of my siblings off to some passing merchants. My point is that there were some real issues in Joseph's family.

So, in the words of our text today, we find the family reunited some 40 years later. Perhaps you know the story. Joseph didn't remain a slave. No, God blessed him. At age 30, Joseph found favor with the most powerful man in

the world at the time, Pharaoh of Egypt. Joseph became his right-hand man. He became the second most powerful man in the world. And here he was, at roughly the age of 56, as a very powerful man, and his brothers knew it.

And they were terrified that with their dad dead, with Jacob gone, Joseph would finally take out revenge on them for what they did. So, you see this. Joseph had the power. He could have done basically anything he wanted to his brothers. But what did he do with that power?

First of all, **“he wept when they spoke to him.”** Why? Well, roughly 17 years before this moment in Genesis 45, Joseph had already forgiven his brothers. He welcomed them into Egypt. He gave them land and their freedom. He thought they were at peace. Yet, here he finds that, after all this time, they still carried guilt. They couldn't believe that Joseph actually loved them, that he truly forgave them.

And as far as I can tell, those brothers tried to appease their consciences as they offered to be Joseph's servants. They thought that this might pacify their brother. They thought that being his servants might earn him forgiveness.

But what would have been accomplished if Joseph had taken the advice of his brothers and made them servants, literally, his slaves? Would that actually have been enough? That wouldn't have given Joseph those lost years of his life back. It wouldn't have somehow restored the broken relationship between the brothers as if now they're even. No, this would have only contributed to the brokenness of the family. It would have only made things worse. So, **Joseph wept.** He had this power, but exerting that power in revenge would never truly fix anything.

That's worth thinking about. When someone comes to you for forgiveness, the temptation is to think that you got to make that person who wronged you suffer, or pay, or do something to make it up to you. And while that might make you feel better, and while that might even make that person feel better, is that really forgiveness?

My friends, I never find Jesus describing forgiveness like this. And there is a reason for that. Forgiveness is lifting a burden off of someone, not adding more burdens on them. Forgiveness is restoring a relationship, not creating a new one with one person above another. Forgiveness absorbs the sin of the other person, not piling more guilt on that person. That's hard to do. Forgiveness says, “I'm never going to bring this up again. It's buried. It sinks to the bottom of the ocean. It's gone.”

That's hard. So, we need to look for ways to find the power and strength to do this. We can't look internally. Forgiveness is something that needs to be learned. It needs to find its source outside of us. And isn't that exactly what Joseph did?

In verse 19 he said to his brothers, **“Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God?”** With those words, Joseph actually exerted a lot of power. You see, he humbled himself, and he forgave. Forgiveness is an act of the will, not of the emotions. It is a decision you make even when you're still feeling bad about what was done to you. Even if someone devastated you, even if they're not sorry, you can still give the whole matter over to God. This is what Joseph did. He took off the robe of judge and gave it to *the* Judge, to God. He gave it to God and was able to just forgive.

And here is why this is a good thing. Your God is a holy and just judge, and he works in ways that are so beyond us. Joseph admits this. He tells his brothers, **“You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring this to pass and to keep many people alive, as it is this day.”** You and I can identify with that, can't we? What is the most horrible evil this world has ever seen? Isn't it what happened to Jesus on the cross?

What happened on the cross was an awful thing. The best possible man, Jesus, was treated in the worst possible way. He was physically nailed to wood after being scourged, beaten, spit on, laughed at. And, as the nails were pounded in his hands and feet, as that was happening, do you know what he cried out? **“Father, forgive them.”** Forgive them. Forgive them.

Wow! That's power. Even though Jesus looks so very weak on the cross as he does this, there is actually tremendous power there. What was he able to do? He absorbed your sin and canceled your debt. He doesn't hold your sins over your head and say, “Now, you owe me. Now you must pay me back.” No. Your sins are gone. Your debt is paid in full.

And when you start to understand that, that you are the recipient of Christ's forgiveness, that he has canceled your debt of billions of dollars, that Jesus went to hell's heart for you and was loving and obedient for you, that's what changes you. Christ's forgiveness changes you. He leads you to forgive each other.

Today, many of you will see and taste how he did this *for you*. Jesus gave his body and blood *for you*. And whether you're up here in a moment receiving that forgiveness or sitting there singing God's praises or reflecting on his sacrifice, know this: the debt is paid. You *are* forgiven.

May that truth lead you to weep when someone comes to you burdened with guilt, and they're sorry. And may Christ's forgiveness lead you to exert real power as you forgive in the same way you have been forgiven. In Christ, the bitterness, the anger, the hate, it's done. You can let go now. And you can live in **the power of forgiveness**. Amen.