

September 17, 2023

Pr. Steve

Texts: Genesis 50: 15-21; Romans 14: 1-12; Matthew 18: 21-35

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Are there any questions, or can I quit now?

After last week's homily on forgiveness, a couple of people came to me after the service and they said, 'That was a terrible homily. I'm no good at forgiving. I don't want to hear about it. I can't learn anything about it anyway. Just, just...it was terrible.' So, I decided that today I would preach about forgiveness, and mercy, and reconciliation because this is the core of our teachings.

Jesus came to stir up a new humanity with us—not other candidates—with us. So when he's speaking about forgiving seventy times seven, that's not just nice poetry. He's saying, '*Practice it that much, and by then you'll start to learn how important this is.*' Ok? Or another example is Jubilee--remember that great celebration in ancient Israel? Every 50 years--forgive all the debts in the land so people can start afresh. That's what the version in Luke's Lord's Prayer actually means: '*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive those indebted to us.*'

So let's start--let's forgive all the debts in America--at least of the 99%. Let's forgive all of them. Can you imagine what would happen? People feeling a fresh start—'*Renew, there's hope; we've got a future.*' Now, a couple of you are saying to yourself, '*But that's not realistic! It's just not going to happen.*' Is that true? So we've arrived at the absolutely best way—in all of this condemnation of people--economically and otherwise? This is the best we can do? Can we not only imagine but begin anew—Beloved Community, now. Get with the program, people. Forgive endlessly in every dimension of life, yes that's what the Gospel is talking about.

This crazy story in the Gospel, huh, hilarious, outrageous--about this unmerciful servant and his obnoxious heart. If you've ever been the target of folks like that, you don't forget. And if you've ever done that to somebody else, oooh! Right, we all have in small ways, right? '*Not going to let him off the hook!*'

The danger of not forgiving is that we become what we hate. That bitterness begins to seep into our hearts. It is incredibly corrosive. It gnaws away at everything else until we begin to feel self-contempt. And that's what behind most people who are truly cruel. They are filled with self-contempt, and self-loathing, and they spread that misery everywhere.

God is always on the side of the victims, always. The whole Bible is dedicated to making sure we understand that God is always on the side of the victims, because God is merciful. So Joseph, in the story today, he was thrown into a pit, an old dry well by his ten brothers. Four traders came along and they sold him into slavery in Egypt. Why? Jealousy! They wanted their father's favor, not Joseph! Jealousy--it's not only wanting what other people have. Jealousy wants what other people want. It's that devious; it begins to undercut.

Job, the one who experiences innocent suffering. He has lost everything: home, family, reputation, income. It's all gone. He's sitting on that ash heap, that community junkyard pile where all the trash is burned. And then his friends come to him and say, *'What did you do wrong? Confess. Tell the truth. What did you do wrong to deserve this?'*

Blaming the victim. It has been around forever. It is so ancient, and it stays with us because it works, doesn't it? Blaming the victim for their circumstances. Blaming them because we don't understand them or want to understand them. Blame, blame, blame the victim.

And Jesus, of course. Everybody wanted everything from Jesus. The disciples wanted status—*'What are we getting out of this?'* And the people—they wanted healing, they wanted reassurance, they wanted rescue. And the Jewish aristocracy, the Sadducees—they wanted his popularity. They wanted his influence, because you know, it's very important to be an influencer, right? Isn't that the new hip, cool, inside word? *'Do you have influence in this society? Tell me.'* And the Romans, they just wanted Order. *'Don't mess with us, Jesus, because no matter how violent we get, there will be Order.'*

Jealousy, wanting what others have--or want--blinds us to what we actually need. We're so consumed, we don't see it. The #1 dogma today is a refusal to face what's real. This is not a religious dogma, oh no. This is a secular dogma, fully practiced everywhere--the refusal to face what's real. *'I'm not involved. There are no consequences for me. It's all those other people. Who knows why these things are happening?'* And when we can't get what we want, well, we play games. There's subterfuge, there's undermining another, there's not telling the whole truth, there's keeping silent, there's blaming, there's scapegoating, and bullying. And then, more and more, we just love it when we can turn on one target together, don't we, by mobbing them. It's called mobocracy. That's what we're doing these days--finding the guilty ones, mob them, destroy them.

Do we have any alternative? Well last week, I suggested that each of us--and we—become, and everyone of us, become an oasis of peace. Can you imagine that? What would change for you? How do you see yourself as an oasis? How does that feel to be an oasis of peace? This really matters, and here are some small steps to help move us in that direction.

It takes a great deal of calm to see the virtue in others. That's what prayer is about, and meditation, and music, and walking in nature--all of those things that encourage a sense of calm in our being--help lead us towards centering again. We keep coming back to the center because from there we can acknowledge the truth of situations.

So where it's fractured with somebody else, we can see not only how we've been hurt, or wronged, or how we're feeling about this, but we can begin to imagine how the other might be feeling, and why. And that leads to a focus on our connection, and not on the offense that has been experienced.

So it has been said throughout the centuries, *'Forgiveness is a great understanding.'* Forgiveness is a great understanding. It's not about just emotional material: *'What he said...and she did.'* I know--that's not to be denied or ignored, absolutely not. But it's not telling us the whole truth.

Forgiveness makes it possible to realize that there can be renewal. We're called to love our enemies, not like them. This is moving us from the reactive mind, all the agitation, right, to a receptive mind, so we can understand what's happening and why the possibility of renewal can happen—because we only blossom in the presence of those who believe in us.

And that's what it is to become an oasis of peace. You're encouraging the blossoming of others. And the more we get to do that, the more we see the wonder and the joy of life, it starts to sink in. It changes our view.

Life becomes more beautiful. We see each other--*'Kang, I see how beautiful you are.'* (I thought he was just an ordinary person, but he's beautiful. I never knew!) And then we begin to taste that communion with the wholeness of life.

We taste what is real because we're becoming real, through forgiveness, and mercy, and reconciling. Amen.

The peace which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.