

## "Am I In The Place Of God?" - Genesis 50:15-21

This morning with God's help we will meditate in the first reading of today: **Genesis 50:15-21**. "Grace and peace to you from God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit who has brought us together". Amen

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Perhaps there were more closely hidden family secrets in the past but in our modern times we hear a lot more muck and dirt. There are even TV shows that present families who are dysfunctional than functional - with some more messed up than others. I am not sure that I completely understand what dysfunctional means because I am not sure that I have ever seen a family that is "functional." Our families live and operate in levels of dysfunctionism.

The reality us that all of our relationships are pretty much that way. We do not communicate particularly well. We do not really like people except when they flatter us. We do not consider the impact of our words and actions on others. In the end we are self-centered, inconsiderate, careless, hateful, goof ups.

Consider today's Old Testament reading. It is the conclusion of the true story of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph's family was more than a little bit messed up. Joseph's family were liars and cheaters. His father, Jacob, lied to his father Isaac and cheated his brother Esau, but then, he was cheated by his uncle Labin.

Jacob had four wives and there was a competition between them as to who would have more sons. The whole thing was a mess. Joseph was the first born son of Jacob's favorite wife but also the second youngest of Jacob's twelve sons.

So in the eyes of Jacob, Joseph was as the beloved first born son. That did not sit so well with his brothers, and Joseph received the double portion which is normally for the first born. Jacob favored him over the others, giving Joseph a special coat of colours. Joseph, therefore, was not too popular with his brothers, because he received his father's favour and also pompously flaunted it in front of his brothers. This was too much for his brothers.

So when Joseph was a teenager his brothers plotted to kill him while they were all out tending the flocks far away from home. They would say that a wild animal attacked him and devoured him. But, the oldest brother, Reuben, stopped that plan and had them throw Joseph into a pit, so that he could come back later and save Joseph.

While Reuben was gone though, some Midianite traders were traveling through and the brothers got the bright idea of selling Joseph to them as a slave. They could make some money

and be rid of their brother at the same time. So they did, and they brought back Joseph's coat to Jacob, ripped and stained with the blood of a goat. Jacob was convinced that his son was eaten by a wild animal, and he mourned over Joseph. What a dysfunctional family.

Joseph was sold as a slave by the Midianites in Egypt to a man named Potiphar, who was an officer of Pharaoh and the captain of the guard. The Lord was with Joseph in Egypt and blessed all that he did with success. Potiphar noticed that the Lord caused Joseph's work to prosper, and so he made him overseer of his entire house. God blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake.

In spite of God's blessings, Joseph would be falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and end up in prison. Through all of this the Lord was with Joseph. This was probably not an easy time for Joseph but, the Lord was with him and worked through him so that Joseph would become great, and do great things.

As time passed for Joseph and his brothers, Joseph got out of jail because he interpreted dreams including one to Pharaoh. Joseph became second only to Pharaoh in power in Egypt, and the brothers found themselves caught in a famine. The brothers heard that there was food in Egypt, so they set out to buy enough to see them through. When they got there, who should they stand before? None other than their long forgotten brother Joseph. Joseph, for the sake of his father, invited them to bring all of their possessions and come and live in Egypt under his care. It would appear at least that the break between them was patched up, but dysfunctionality is dysfunctionality; things do not change too quickly.

So, was the relationship patched up? Was there complete reconciliation? Or, were appearances maintained for the sake of their aging father Jacob? And then the day came when, old Jacob died.

"When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him? It all came rushing and tumbling back so harshly now as they stood together after Jacob's burial. The brothers' day has come. They remembered all too well their plotting to get rid of Joseph so many years ago.

So, here is the question of the day. If you were Joseph, if you had been sold into slavery by members of your family and gone through a whole series of difficulties and trials as a result, what would be your attitude toward them? According to your flesh, your old Adam, you might be plotting over the years how you would get back at them if given the chance. You would harbor a pretty

serious and angry grudge. That's how we are by nature, not wanting to be merciful but wanting to get even, not wanting to forgive but to condemn. No doubt, Joseph had to work through some of these sorts of things. What was Joseph going to do? He was going to forgive his penitent brothers. And what does that say to us? "How do we, like Joseph, forgive those who have hurt us, done us wrong?" The answer is not found in ourselves.

Look at today's Gospel reading; Jesus' Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. We hear how the king canceled his servant's debt. The amount that the man owed the king was ten thousand talents. Translated into today's dollars, that debt would be many millions. In other words, it was completely impossible for a slave to repay that kind of money. The king therefore had every right to seize his slave's wife and children and all of his belongings. But, this is not what the king did. He had compassion. He had compassion on the man and forgave his debt.

The answer to the question "How do we, like Joseph, forgive?" is found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Saviour. It is through Jesus Christ that we are forgiven, He has paid for us the impossible debt of sin. Because Christ first forgave us of this great debt, now, we are called to forgive others; unlike that unmerciful servant who refused to forgive the relatively tiny debt of his fellow servant.

Through Christ's infinite love for us, we are called to forgive others - yes, even those who have done us the greatest evils imaginable. This is the gift that God has given us through Jesus Christ. This may not always be easy, and so, we who belong to the Lord pray that we may see others as He sees them; that we who are His may listen with His ears; and, we who are His may proclaim His forgiving words to others.

Joseph's brothers were like the deeply indebted man of our gospel reading (Matt 18:21-35) who threw himself down before the king to ask for mercy and the king gave it. Joseph forgave his brothers. He was merciful. He was merciful because the Lord in whom he trusted was merciful. He believed in a God who was slow to anger and compassionate to those who take refuge in Him.

Filled with that forgiving love, it overflowed through Joseph to his brothers. He received them back with no penalty or retribution and even did good to them and their families and spoke kind and comforting words to them. Joseph saw what only faith can see, that is that the Lord loved him and was with him even at the lowest points in his life. In fact, he came to recognize that God was behind the low points, using even those things to accomplish His good and merciful purposes.

Remember what Joseph said to his brothers? **"It was not you who sent me here but God."** Only faith can say that. God caused this hardship. Now God is not the author of evil or sin or sickness or death. But in this fallen world He even uses such things for our good. Again Joseph said to His brothers, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."

Friends, God allows us to suffer illness, trials, turmoils or hatred to kill our old Adam and to draw us to Himself ever more closely. He teaches us to trust in Him and to cling to nothing else for our help and salvation. He works all things together for the good of those who love and believe in Him, who are called according to His purpose. Living by faith in Jesus, we do not seek vengeance. For we know that vengeance belongs to the Lord, and like Joseph we trust that He will do what is just and right in the end. And above all we know that Jesus suffered all the vengeance of the whole world's sin on the cross to take it away. Everything that you had coming, everything that anyone else deserves, Jesus took to the cross and covered with His blood in our place to save us.

All of that dysfunctional stuff, all of the vengeance, and hatefulness, and anger, and lying and cheating is forgiven. Just as our Father is merciful to us in this way, we also now show mercy to others. Just as Jesus taught us to pray, **Forgive us of our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.**

Joseph said to his brothers, **"Am I in the place of God?"** By that he was saying that he would not take vengeance, which belongs to the Lord. And yet, in a way, Joseph was in the place of God. He was put there by God, and he stood in the stead of Christ, as an image, a picture, of Jesus in giving the forgiveness of the Lord to his brothers.

So it still is in the church. The called Pastor stands in Christ's stead as an image, a picture, of Jesus to give you the forgiveness of the Lord in the absolution. And you also, stand in Christ's stead as an image, a picture, of Jesus to give the forgiveness of the Lord to those who are around you who ever that might be. As a member of the body of Christ, you stand in the place of God to forgive and love one another. For Christ dwells in you by your baptismal faith to be merciful just as your Father in heaven is merciful to you. Amen.

"The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keeps your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour". Amen