

## **Barre Congregational Church Outdoor Service**

September 13, 2020: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ **Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost**~

***“The Call to Forgive”***

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**Scripture Reading: Genesis 50 v 15 - 21 and Matthew 18 v 21 - 22**

### **I. Introduction:**

Forgiveness is probably one of the most complex phenomena in human life. It is important, and extremely difficult work to do. For some it is something one receives just to move on, and for others it is something that occurs after there is acknowledgment of hurt done to them. My mother required from her children to forgive, no matter what. She always just wanted to have peace in the home. We, on the other hand, always felt that that expectation was a little unfair when things happened among us as siblings (smile)! Does that sound familiar to you in your own families?

### **II. When Resentment builds up:**

In our Genesis passage, we see an interesting example of what it involves making things right with someone whom we have hurt, or who hurt us. The story of Joseph and his brothers is not an unfamiliar story to us. We learn about them in Sunday school, confirmation class, and in our own reading of the Bible stories. It is about a group of siblings who had a regular life with their parents, until the young Joseph started to have dreams, which did not go down well with his brothers. The dreams indicated that he would become an important person and be above them; and they would have to bow down before him. In addition, Joseph, we read earlier in Genesis Chapter 37 was the favorite son of his father, Jacob, because he was born to him and Rachel at an older age. You can imagine the jealousy, resentment that the brothers must have felt for a long time. So, we read how they one day decided to sell Joseph as a slave to a group of merchants who were on their way to Egypt. There Joseph was bought by Potiphar, and later became second in command in the house of Pharaoh in Egypt. Joseph basically lost his innocent childhood to a life of struggle, being a slave, landed in prison for something he did not do. He lost his family life to a life of strangers in a foreign land.

### **III. The Forgiving Heart of Joseph:**

In our passage we see the brothers of Joseph approach him after their father's death. In verses 15 – 17 they seek forgiveness from Joseph for what they had done to him. They are afraid that he would

have hatred and contempt for them, so they don't do it in a direct way but sent him a written note from their father, which indicated they did not want a confrontation with Joseph, says Victor P. Hamilton in his Book of Genesis. Their request from Joseph is to first, forgive them for the crimes they committed against him, then to forgive them as servants of God. Perhaps his heart would be softened should he see how they refer to themselves as children and servants of God. Joseph, says Hamilton, would not recriminate against fellow believers, would he?

What the brothers did not understand was that Joseph already forgave them. In Chapter 45 we see Joseph overcome with pain as he revealed himself to his brothers, because they did not realize they bought grain from him, their brother, down in Egypt during the famine. We read how Joseph wept loudly as he told them who he was. He must have been in such unimaginable pain. "I am Joseph, the one you sold to Egypt" followed by, "do not be distressed and angry at yourself". What is described in Chapter 45 is about someone who in himself did not carry unforgiving feelings towards them, but was able to name their sins, their crimes, and at the same time let them know that they need not worry. Here in Chapter 50 verse 17, we see Joseph weep again uncontrollably. And when he did, they threw themselves in front of him, declaring themselves as slaves to him. What a contrast; they sold him into slavery, and here they now declare themselves as slaves.

Joseph's response is more than just forgiveness in words only. He first tells them that he is not God, who would be the One to impose retribution, says Hamilton. Instead, he, Joseph, looks at things the way God does, with a merciful and forgiving heart. Then he tells them not to be afraid, but that he will take care of them. He concludes by saying that while they may have done that horrible crime against him, God turned all of that into the good for many, referring to the fact that he was able to help so many during the famine, therefore being an instrument of God for the survival of many.

#### **IV. Conclusion – The Call to Forgive:**

Forgiveness is at the heart of this passage of Joseph and his brothers. There is a crime, there is a lot of pain for an exceedingly long time, and there is forgiveness. We see the brothers, filled with guilt, reveal what they did to him, realizing they could not hide their actions from him anymore. Afraid that he would carry hatred towards them, they decided it was time to come clean, and to ask for forgiveness, and instead of retaliation, Joseph forgave them. It reminds us of how Judas Iscariot became the traitor in the suffering of Jesus at the end of His life, but how God transforms the experience of the crucifixion into the redemptive purpose for the whole world.

In our Matthew verses we see Jesus' response to the question of forgiveness, how many times we need to forgive those who sinned against us. Forgiveness is one of those things that is so important in the heart and mind of God.

Where I really came to learn and understand what forgiveness was about outside of the Biblical message, was through the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa right after the end of Apartheid. I saw the depth of the pain of the families of victims who suffered and died at the hands of the apartheid government, and how through the telling and hearing of what happened, the acknowledgment of the hurts and the unnecessary deaths and crimes against humanity, the families were able to forgive those who committed those crimes. Like Joseph, many families were left in so much pain due to the loss of loved ones, and the horrible things that happened during apartheid. It required much from them to offer forgiveness to those who were the perpetrators. That experience of seeing the work of the TRC shaped my work in reconciliation the last 27 years and made a lasting impact on me personally. I have seen how transformative it can be for people to come together and say I am sorry for what I have done, to ask for forgiveness and to receive it. I have seen forgiving hearts in so much of my work and in my life in different parts of the world, that I know that God wants that from us.

We are all being challenged this morning by God's word, by Godself, to look into ourselves to see what it is that we are thinking and doing to others that are hurting them, or when others come to us to reach out, saying sorry for what they have done, to be like a Joseph, forgiving and showing care. It is through a forgiving heart that we all can move forward in our own lives and where families, communities, nations can come together and be together in a new redeeming way, as Christ has forgiven us and lives in us. May God show us every day how to forgive. May God give us all forgiving hearts. Amen