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Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, the reading from Genesis today is a most peculiar scene.

I don't know if we noticed, but there in that scene Joseph's brothers attempt to deceive Joseph by telling him that their father had given them instructions before he died.

They say that their father told them to tell Joseph to forgive his brothers the crime they had committed against him.

Remember way earlier in this story Joseph's brothers out of jealousy had sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt.

But now, the situation has been resolved such that Joseph has been reunited with his brothers, but their father has since died.

And notice then the brothers aren't absolutely sure of Joseph.

They aren't sure whether Joseph still holds a grudge for what they had done to him.

And so, they want to get some reassurance Joseph won't take his revenge upon them.

And thus they tell Joseph that their father upon his death bed had asked that Joseph would forgive his brothers.

And notice then what happens, and this is where the scene gets peculiar.

Notice that Joseph begins to weep. And then his brothers begin to weep.

And it is all very strange.

Yes, this is a most peculiar scene.

PAUSE

Now, I have to say that how I have always interpreted this text is that Joseph weeps because his brothers still don't trust him.

And so, Joseph sees that he and his brothers still aren't fully reconciled, and it makes him weep.

And I always thought, the brothers weep in return because they recognize that Joseph in his tears shows he harbors no ill-will.

That used to be how I read this text.

But I had a revelation lately. For notice that Joseph never does say to his brothers, "I forgive you."

Why is that the case? Why does he never say, "I forgive you"?

Instead, Joseph tries to reassure his brothers saying, "Do not be afraid. Have no fear," and similarly the text says Joseph spoke kindly to his brothers.

But, Joseph never says, "I forgive you."

PAUSE

Now there is a similar scene, earlier in Genesis, whereby Esau and his brother Jacob reunite after some time of estrangement.

Remember in that story, Jacob had deceived his father, and stole the birthright from Esau.

And Jacob runs away from home fearing his brother Esau's revenge.

Time passes and eventually these two brothers reunite, and Esau extends a most loving welcome to Jacob. And they both weep.

And then Esau says to Jacob let us go our way together. Let us journey together side by side.

But, Jacob makes excuses for why he can't journey with his brother, "My children are weak and go slowly. My flocks and herds are nursing, and can't be driven too quickly."

So on and so forth, but in essence, even though they seemed reconciled, Jacob still doesn't trust his brother Esau. Jacob thinks Esau may still want to exact his revenge.

This story is very similar then to the story of Joseph and his brothers, and notice that in neither story does the party who was wronged (Esau nor Joseph) say to the other party who wronged them, "I forgive you."

Those words are never uttered.

And in fact the first instance of that word "forgive" in the Bible appears in our text today at the very end of Genesis.

But again, Joseph in this text never says, "I forgive you."

And here then is my revelation, for I believe Joseph weeps when his brothers tell him their father asked that Joseph would forgive his brothers...

Joseph weeps NOT because his brothers are trying to deceive him.

Joseph weeps NOT because Joseph is stubborn and won't say, "I forgive you."

No, I believe Joseph weeps because the author of Genesis is inserting his or her own opinion into the text, whereby Joseph weeps, because that author behind the writing of Genesis is weeping, because there was in ancient Judaism no protocol by which a person could say, "I forgive you."

The text then is a critique of Jewish tradition.

Joseph weeps because he is not allowed to say to his brothers, "I forgive you."

Neither could Esau say to his brother Jacob, "I forgive you."

For remember from the New Testament that only God can forgive sins.

In the NT, in the Gospel of Mark, there is that story where Jesus is at his home, and a paralytic man is lowered down through the roof of his home, and Jesus says to the man, "Your sins are forgiven."

And how do the religious leaders respond, "This is blasphemy. Only God can forgive sins."

And so, again, there was apparently no protocol in Jewish tradition by which one human being could say to another human being, "I forgive you."

Because the declaration of forgiveness was the purview of God.

Indeed, our Lord Jesus may have been the first Jewish man ever to have said to another human being, "I forgive you."

What a radical notion! What a revolutionary idea! Jesus forgives another human being of their sin.

And this...this opened up a whole new understanding of forgiveness.

Indeed with this background in mind, think about that line from The Lord's Prayer: And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

In light of what we just learned, think about how mind-blowing that line in The Lord's Prayer is: Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

God forgives us and so we are called, expected, obligated to forgive others.

Actually, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" could be construed to mean that we forgive others first and we ask God to forgive us according to how we forgive others.

However, rather than seeing God's forgiveness as somehow conditional upon our acts of forgiveness...

I rather think of this phrase from The Lord's Prayer to mean that forgiveness is more than just an act of God.

People can forgive other people just as God forgives people.

Both are equally valid.

Maybe the only distinction is that God's forgiveness has bearing on our eternal salvation. But even that may be splitting hairs.

But ultimately, what we see is that forgiveness is no longer the exclusive purview of God. People can forgive as well.

And what is truly fascinating, as we see in our gospel text, is that humans are called to be lavish, extravagant, almost unrestrained with their forgiveness.

Peter comes to Jesus and he says, “Lord, if someone sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

And Jesus says, “Not seven time, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Or another way to translate that is “seventy times seven,” that is 490 times.

So, it is NOT just that humans can forgive other humans, but humans are to be doing so *ad nauseum*, almost recklessly.

PAUSE

But, I want to return to the stories in Genesis again, and I want us to see why the author of Genesis seems so bent on humans expressing forgiveness.

For what is the author’s critique of forgiveness?

Why is forgiveness so important whereas the author of Genesis weeps that there is NOT a protocol in place for humans to say to other humans, “I forgive you”?

So notice what Jacob’s feeling toward his brother Esau.

And notice what the brothers’ feel toward Joseph?

What is the feeling, what is lacking in those relationships? Trust.

And again I never put those two together until recently—forgiveness and trust go hand in hand.

To forgive another person is to reestablish trust in the relationship.

To forgive another person is to say to the other, “I was hurt, and you need to know that, and yet I value our relationship that I want our relationship to be healed.”

And so, and here is the really hard truth, to forgive another person is to acknowledge to the other one’s own vulnerability, and that is not easy to do.

It is not easy to say “I forgive you,” because it is not easy to acknowledge that someone hurt us.

We don't like to appear vulnerable, we don't like to give the other that satisfaction, to have to say you hurt me.

That's hard. But it is in the vulnerability that real healing can and does occur.

Vulnerability is where the trust is reestablished.

Because only then does the wrongdoer know the wrong they have done.

Only then can they see the humanity in the one they hurt, and only then can they respond in a humane way, by showing trust.

PAUSE

In Genesis 50, in this scene here today...

Joseph says to his brothers, "Do not be afraid." "Have no fear," Joseph says.

In essence, he is saying, "Trust me."

But, how can your brothers trust you, Joseph?

How can anyone trust another fully, so says the author of Genesis, unless we show our true selves, unless our true humanity is made visible for the other to see.

That is where the words, "I forgive you," come into play.

When we can say, "I was hurt. This is me bleeding before you. But, I still value our relationship, and I forgive you," when we can say that, it is truly powerful.

That is after all what our Lord Jesus did so amazingly on the cross, when he says, in his most vulnerable moment, "Father, forgive them, as I forgive them."

Thanks be to God. AMEN.