



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

The Divine Imperative

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 13, 2020

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

The biblical lessons assigned for the fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost have it all. There is family treachery and deceit, slavery and violence, imprisonment, and even torture. And, in each of these lessons, we are brought to remember the divine imperative to forgive. Jesus is positively *radical* on this topic, but we'll come to that later. First, let's examine the lesson from Genesis.

The story of Joseph takes up a significant portion of Genesis, running from chapter 37 through chapter 50 at the end of the book. You may remember the story. After all, he's one of the few Old Testament figures to be featured in a Broadway musical: *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat*, lyrics by Tim Rice and music by Andrew Lloyd Webber.

The Bible says Joseph's father, "loved Joseph more than any of his other children, because he was the son of his old age." Ahhh, the favored, younger son. We know this character, don't we? His father gives him a long robe with sleeves, a luxurious robe different from the ordinary sleeveless tunic that only reached the knees. This is the kind of robe that may symbolize a royal claim. This is the kind of robe that makes it impossible for Joseph to undertake any kind of manual labor—a tiny, little detail not lost on any one of his jealous brothers.

Joseph has powerful, divine dreams, which also make his brothers resentful. He even dreams his brothers will one day pay homage to him, and then he has the temerity to *share* that dream with them! The brothers decide to throw him down a dry well, but, instead, they end up selling him into slavery to some passing merchants. That way they can make a few bucks on the deal and not have their younger brother's blood on their hands.

Joseph struggles as a slave in Egypt, but he rises to prominence in Pharaoh's administration, eventually being appointed Vizier, a position akin to being a prime minister, the highest official in ancient Egypt behind the Pharaoh himself. Because of this

high office, Joseph is uniquely positioned to offer help to his family and the other Israelites when a severe famine brings them all to near starvation. The brothers come around begging for food, and, not being recognized by them, Joseph puts them through several tests before revealing himself. Finally, forgiving them, he gives them food to eat.

Today's reading occurs at the end of Joseph's life. He's still a prominent official in Egypt, and he has used his resources to make provisions for his family and his people. However, his father has just died and Joseph's brothers are now fearing the possibility of some delayed retribution from Joseph. He's definitely in a position to have them punished, and if he *were* one to hold a grudge, they would all be finished.

So, they lie to him and tell him that it was their father's dying wish for Joseph to forgive his brothers. You have got to love these guys. They just can't tell the truth. Because they never seem to be able to do the right thing, they never trust that Joseph will. But Joseph had forgiven them before, and it was his intent that his forgiveness remain with them, even though his brothers had been unspeakably evil to him.

He says to them, "Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So, have no fear. I myself will provide for you and for your little ones. In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them." He was going to forgive them anyway. Perhaps Joseph knew what wise men and women know: the power of forgiveness blesses the one offering forgiveness just as powerfully as the one who is forgiven.

The Covid-19 pandemic has placed tremendous pressure on primary relationships. We all thought this would be over by Easter and then by Pentecost, surely by Labor Day and now we're not quite sure when it will all be over. We do know we have all been changed.

In this sort of environment, people in primary relationships are finding that they need to sort them out. "Good enough" just isn't, in a pandemic. People are so much more aware of their mortality. People in poor relationships want to make them better. People who want to be in a relationship are made much more aware of their aloneness, while still other people who live alone are giving thanks for their solitude.

There are opportunities for insight all the way around in a unique time like this one. The old Christian monastics used to say, "Everything you need can be found in your cell." What they meant was, "You need to look inward for your fulfillment. You don't need to be bouncing from person to person or from place to place to find yourself or God. That is a distracted way of existing. Be still, be quiet, and go deeper inside. Make of your small apartment a place of divine encounter and find in your confinement the holy which resides within."

No matter how you look at it, pandemic living is a challenge. Some of us are finding our roommates or spouses are impossible to live with in such close quarters over such a long haul. Some of us are discovering we are so much more difficult to live with than we ever truly realized. So this, this is truly a time to be thinking very seriously about forgiveness.

Perhaps we should have a Sunday morning when we just cut this livestream and invite everyone to take the next hour to make the calls or to write the letters to the people we need to forgive. Then, we could invite everyone to contact the folks from whom we need

to seek forgiveness. If you take just a few moments, those names will reveal themselves to you. We actually know whom we should be calling. We are just in the habit of pushing them farther and farther into the corners of our consciousness. Seriously. This could be the most powerful, holy, and sacred experience many of us have ever experienced in divine worship.

In *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace*, Jack Kornfield describes an African forgiveness ritual:

"In the Babemba tribe of South Africa, when a person acts irresponsibly or unjustly, he is placed in the center of the village, alone and unfettered. All work ceases, and every man, woman, and child in the village gathers in a large circle around the accused individual. Then each person in the tribe speaks to the accused, one at a time, each recalling the good things the person in the center of the circle has done in his lifetime.

"Every incident, every experience that can be recalled with any detail and accuracy, is recounted. All his positive attributes, good deeds, strengths, and kindnesses are recited carefully and at length. This tribal ceremony often lasts for several days. At the end, the tribal circle is broken, a joyous celebration takes place, and the person is symbolically and literally welcomed back into the tribe."ⁱ

So, let's take a moment to reflect on why you are withholding your own forgiveness.

- You think they aren't truly repentant?
- You believe they haven't suffered enough?
- Have you concluded they don't deserve your forgiveness?

Let's talk about why YOU won't ask for forgiveness from someone else...

- Are you clueless? Do you honestly feel you haven't done anything wrong?
- Are you frightened that forgiveness will not be granted?
- Are you worried you will make things even worse? How much worse could they get?

"Making amends" is a critical, non-negotiable step in most addiction recovery programs, and it is a crucial practice in so many other parts of life. It's true. Forgiveness is challenging, especially when the offending person offers either an insincere apology or nothing at all. However, offering forgiveness is often the healthiest way to move forward.

One prominent model, put forth by educational psychologist Robert Enright, outlines four steps of forgiveness.

- The first step is to uncover your anger by exploring how you've either avoided or addressed the emotion.
- The second step is to make the decision to forgive. Forgiveness is a decision. It's important to acknowledge that ignoring or coping with the offense hasn't worked, and, therefore, forgiveness may provide a path forward.
- Third, cultivate forgiveness by developing compassion for the offender. Reflect on whether the act was due to malicious intent or to circumstances in the offender's life.

- Finally, release the harmful emotions you're holding and reflect on how you may have grown from the experience and the act of forgiveness itself.

In the last several years, I've been approached by several members of our congregation regarding offering forgiveness for a public figure. They understand the anger they're holding isn't healthy for them, but they don't know how to let go of it. It's a difficult question.

Dr. Enright reminds us, "Forgiveness is the release of resentment or anger. Yet, offering forgiveness doesn't mean you've arrived at reconciliation. In forgiving someone, you don't have to return to the same relationship or accept the same harmful behaviors from an offender. Offering forgiveness can be critically important for the emotional and spiritual health of anyone who has been victimized. It has the power to release people to move forward rather than holding them emotionally engaged in an injustice or trauma. Forgiveness has also been shown to elevate mood, enhance optimism, and guard against anger, stress, anxiety, and depression."ⁱⁱ

A rabbi once told me an old story about Rabbi Epstein, who was giving his Yom Kippur sermon about forgiveness. He asked his congregation, "How many of you have forgiven your enemies?" About half held up their hands. He then rephrased his question, "How many of you want to forgive your enemies?" Slowly, every hand in the congregation went up, except for one. Little old Sadie Horowitz.

"Mrs. Horowitz," inquired the Rabbi, "are you not willing to forgive your enemies, especially on this Day of Atonement when God forgives us all?" "I don't have any enemies" Mrs. Horowitz replied, smiling sweetly. "Mrs. Horowitz, that is impressive. How old are you?" "Ninety-eight," she replied. "Oh Mrs. Horowitz, what a blessing and a lesson to us all you are. Would you please stand up and in front of this congregation tell us all how a person can live to be ninety-eight and not have an enemy in the world?"

Little old Mrs. Horowitz got up slowly, smiled, faced the congregation, and said, "I outlived all those old witches." It was not what the rabbi had expected.

In Paul's Letter to the Romans, the apostle asks, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God." Clearly, the early Christian community needed to be reminded of the teachings of Jesus when it came to forgiveness.

In the Gospel of Matthew, it's Peter who tees up the question. "Peter came and said to Jesus, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?'" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Jesus then tells a horrific parable about a slave who has been forgiven by his master but who does not extend forgiveness to another slave in similar circumstances. The master says, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

So, Jesus says, "My heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." In other words, I tell you most solemnly,

forgiveness is not optional within the Christian community. Forgiveness is a divine imperative; a non-negotiable demand from Jesus the Christ. The anger and the intensity Jesus used in telling this story gives us some insight as to the critical centrality of this teaching.

We are not merely asked to forgive. We are *commanded* to forgive.

“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Amen.

ⁱ Jack Kornfield, *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace*, Dell/Bantam Books, A Division of Random House, New York, New York, c. 2002

ⁱⁱ Dr. Robert Enright, “Forgiveness,” *Psychology Today*, Dr. Robert Enright, www.psychologytoday.com (accessed September 1, 2020)

©2020 St. Bartholomew’s Church in The City of New York.
For information about St. Bart’s and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022