

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, ***"It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil which we did to him."*** So, they sent a message to Joseph saying, "Your father gave this command before he died, 'Say to Joseph, Forgive, I pray you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.' And now, we pray you, forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him, and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph said to them, "Fear not, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So, do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus, he reassured them and comforted them.

A while back I saw a sign in a bank saying, ***"To err is human; to forgive is not our policy."*** For many, ***to forgive is not "our policy."*** Our policy is to hold a grudge or break off relations with the offender or seek revenge. Probably, it is not our policy to forgive because it is one of the most difficult, if not the most difficult thing to do. One woman wrote Ann Landers: "I haven't spoken to my brother's wife in seven years. It would take the whole newspaper to tell you the entire story, so I'll just say she did me unbelievable dirt and I have never been able to forgive her." If we do manage to forgive, we declare that we will never forget the wrong done to us. A little boy disobeyed his mother and his conscience bothered him. He was sneaking to his room when his mother asked, "Where are you going, Frank?" "Sneaking To my room," he said. "I want to talk with God." "Is it something you can't tell your mother?" "Yes, it is," said Frank. "You'll just scold and punish me, while God will forgive me and forget about it." No, it is not easy to forgive and forget. Forgiveness is not lightly saying, "Let's kiss and make up," or "Shake hands and forget about it." Forgiveness is so very difficult because it calls for a renewed personal relationship where things are as though nothing happened between the parties.

In today's First Lesson, we have the account of Joseph's forgiving his brothers after their father's death. On the surface, it looks very easy, but it must have been most difficult for Joseph because of what his brothers had done to him. When he was seventeen years old, he aroused the hatred and jealousy of his brothers. When they returned home from keeping the sheep, Joseph was a tattle-tale. He told his father about their misbehavior. Moreover, he was his father's favorite son, and this did not go well with the brothers. Jacob, his father, gave Joseph a beautiful coat of many colors, but none of the other sons was so favored. To add insult to injury, Joseph was a dreamer. One time he dreamed that one day he would be ruler and his brothers would bow down to him.

The hatred became so intense that while out in the fields tending their sheep, they planned to kill Joseph. But, upon further discussion, they decided to throw him into a pit until some Ishmaelites came along. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver, and he was carried as a slave to Egypt where he was again sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver, and he was government. Joseph soon found favor with Potiphar who gave Joseph complete charge of his business affairs. However, when Joseph refused the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife, he was thrown into prison. There he languished as a forgotten man, until he was called to interpret one of Pharaohs' dreams. The interpretation so pleased Pharaoh that eventually he made Joseph prime minister of Egypt. With wisdom given him by God, Joseph stored up food over a period of seven years, for in the dream he learned that these years would be followed by seven lean years. When Jacob and his sons were about to die of famine, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy some of Joseph's grain. When the brothers came to Joseph, he gradually revealed himself to them, for they and their father had thought he was dead. Joseph had the Jews come to Egypt to escape the famine. After Jacob died, the brothers were scared of what revenge Joseph would take on them. Up to this time, their selling him into slavery was not discussed. No apologies were made and no forgiveness was requested. Now came the time to settle accounts. Now Joseph had these cruel brothers where he wanted them. When he thought of the years he was separated from his father and beloved brother, Benjamin; when he thought of the years of slavery, the torture of the prison, and the charge against him as an adulterer, he must have longed to get back at them. When the brothers asked for forgiveness, it was no easy thing. Could he forgive? Would he ever forget? Could he and his brothers be good friends again? **What was Joseph's response? Listen to his words in our text, *"I will provide for you and your little ones."* The text comments, *"Thus he reassured them and comforted them."* Why did Joseph forgive them? Why should we forgive those who have done far less things to us than his brothers had done to Joseph?**

WHY SHOULD WE FORGIVE? For the same reason Joseph forgave. We are to obey our heavenly Father's command to forgive as Joseph obeyed his earthly father's command to forgive his brothers. The brothers said to Joseph, "*Your father gave this command before he died, 'Say to Joseph, Forgive, I pray you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.'*"

Likewise, our heavenly Father through his Son commands us to forgive. **Therefore, forgiveness is an act of obedience to God.** Jesus showed us how to forgive, even enemies, for on the cross, he prayed, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" If we are to forgive even those who kill us, how much more are we to forgive lesser crimes. Moreover, in today's Gospel lesson (Matthew 18:21-35), Jesus gave a parable teaching us the necessity of forgiving our fellowman. He told the story of a man who owed a king \$10,000, but out of pity, the king forgave him the debt. But this same man found another who owed him only \$100. Having no pity, he had the man thrown in jail. When the king heard the report of what the forgiven debtor had done to another debtor, he had him thrown in jail until he paid the \$10,000. So, Jesus gives the moral of the story: "*So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.*" At another time, Jesus emphasized the need of our forgiving each other when he said that if we have any ill feeling about a person and come to the altar with a gift to God, we should leave the gift at the altar, get reconciled with our brother, and then come and offer the gift which would be acceptable.

WHY DO WE HAVE TO FORGIVE OTHERS OR SELF BEFORE GOD WILL FORGIVE US? It is not a condition that God lays down. It is not a kind of payment God requires for forgiveness. **The reason we must forgive first is because if we have an unforgiving heart, God cannot forgive us.** When we hold spite, when we hate, when we want retaliation, our hearts are closed tight with anger and fear. For God to forgive us, we must be open and receptive to God's love and mercy. **If we have our hands clenched into fists, there is no way we can receive a gift.** It is said that one-time Leonardo da Vinci had an argument with a certain man. He lashed out against the fellow with bitter words and threatening gestures. When the argument was over, Leonardo went back to his canvas where he was working on the face of Jesus. He could not make one stroke. At last he realized what the trouble was. He put down his brush and made peace with the man. Then he returned to his studio and calmly resumed his painting. **YES, IT IS THROUGH THE GIFT OF FORGIVING OTHERS THAT WE FIND PEACE WITH OTHERS AND WITH OURSELVES.**

BUT IT WAS NOT EASY FOR JOSEPH TO FORGIVE THE TERRIBLE THINGS HIS BROTHERS DID TO HIM. And it is no easy thing for us to forgive what people do to us. **Why then do we forgive?** Joseph gives us an example to follow. When the brothers made their appeal for his forgiveness, our text says, "*Joseph wept when they spoke to him.*" He was deeply moved with pity and compassion. And we, too, will forgive when we have tears of **COMPASSION** in our eyes.

Not to have pity for offenders means we are very angry, bitter, and hurt by what was done to us or said about us. We then are out to get the offender, to get our pound of flesh, to pay back more than we received. Ann Landers tells about a man who saw an ad in a newspaper for a practically new Porsche for sale at fifty dollars. He figured it was a typographical error, for even \$5,000 would be a bargain for that kind of car. He hurried to the address to look at the car. The lady who answered the door assured him the price really was fifty dollars. He went to look at the nearly new beautiful Porsche and drove it around the block. When he returned, he gave her fifty dollars in cash, and the lady gave him the necessary papers. Curiosity got the better of him, and he asked her why she was selling it at this ridiculously low price. She explained, "My husband ran off with his secretary and left a note instructing me to sell the car and send him the money."

Gandhi freed his country from Great Britain on the basis of passive resistance. When some of his followers wanted to use violence to strike back at British troops, he said, "*If everyone took an eye for an eye, the whole world would be blind.*" *An old proverb says, "The person who pursues revenge should dig two graves."*

Justice calls for retaliation and revenge, but mercy wants forgiveness. Following Jesus' example and teachings, a Christian tempers justice with mercy. In the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, justice called for every laborer to get paid for the hours worked, but the one who worked one hour received as much as the one who worked ten hours. Mercy was shown in paying the full amount to everyone out of generosity. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, justice

said, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants." But mercy said, "Kill the fatted calf. Bring a robe and shoes. Let's celebrate his homecoming." Once Pharisees were about to stone to death a woman caught in the act of adultery. Justice said, "Stone her!" Mercy in Jesus said, "Go and sin no more."

TODAY WE CAN FORGIVE OUT OF 'COMPASSION.' We are prone to find fault, gossip, and be judgmental of sinners. How do we treat a divorcee in our church? Do we exclude drug addicts? How do we feel about an unmarried teenager who is pregnant? Is there pity in our hearts? Do we weep for them and reach out in forgiveness, or do we shun them, not speak to them, and give them looks of disapproval? The president of a church youth group became pregnant. When the church heard about it, the first reaction was to remove her from office. A motion to do that was made at the monthly Board meeting, but after discussion, it was tabled. Then the Spirit led the church to forgive and to be understanding. As a result, the couple decided to marry and the church continued to give them moral support. After a few years, the father of the child was elected the lay leader of the church. **Forgiveness from compassion saved a family for God!**

Why should we show compassion and mercy to offenders? To be a Christian and as such to be a follower of Christ is to extend mercy as he did. He taught, "**Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.**" When Joseph listened to his brother's plea, he chose to extend to them MERCY because of the love his Father showered on him.

YES, Joseph willingly forgave his brothers—THOSE WHO SOLD HIM INTO SLAVERY - which resulted in hard labor, pain and hunger. But he came to realize that this journey allowed him to gain GREAT GOOD THAT WAS BROUGHT OUT OF THEIR EVIL. Here along with Joseph we see that God had a great purpose for his suffering. He grew and changed the world for many. **That is another reason for our forgiving others. Through the sin inflicted on us, God will bring some good to self and others.**

You will note that Joseph at no time minimized or excused the sin of his brothers. Honestly and frankly he said to them, "*As for you, you meant evil against me.*" He said to them in other words, "*Yes, you were rascals. You took me away from my home. You sold me for twenty lousy pieces of silver into slavery. You made me lose all my liberty, suffer in prison, and be a stranger in a foreign land. Yes, you sinned against me. You hated me and tried to get rid of me. At the same time, you broke our father's heart because you told him I was killed by an animal.*"

If there is going to be a proper settlement of accounts between people, there must be total honesty. Yes, you have sinned against me. Yes, it was a nasty, dirty trick. The rumor you spread about me was a vicious lie which ruined my reputation. To deny the seriousness of the sin, to make light of it, or to say it was only a joke is not to tell the truth. Face up to it - it was a terrible, horrible thing you did to me.

All right, that is that! So, what? **Can I forgive you after all you did to me?** Following Joseph's example, I can and I will forgive, because "God meant it for good." In Joseph's case, God used the brother's sin to save a whole nation, Egypt, from dying in a seven-year drought. Moreover, if Joseph had not gone to Egypt, God's covenant people would have perished from hunger. **GOD BROUGHT GOOD OUT OF EVIL!!**

AND HE ALWAYS DOES!! Look at the cross. From the human viewpoint, Jesus' death was a horrible sin ending in defeat, a lost cause. Out of that horrible crucifixion, *out of defeat, out of suffering, out of shame and disgrace, came a world set free from sin and Satan and death.* YES... **GOD BROUGHT GOOD OUT OF EVIL!!**

IT HAPPENS TO YOU AND ME EACH DAY...As I said at the beginning, *to forgive is probably the most difficult thing we Christians have to do.* By nature, we would rather hold a grudge, hate, and seek retaliation. Therefore, we cannot really forgive on our own strength. **We need help from GOD above.**

A Turkish soldier had beaten a Christian soldier until he was half-conscious. While he kicked him, he asked, "What can your Christ do for you now?" The Christian calmly replied, "*He can give me strength to forgive you.*"

Amen.