

+ 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost: September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020 +  
St Paul Lutheran, Tomah, Wisconsin  
Pastor Korey Van Kampen  
***“Forgiveness Sets You Free”***

Prisons are scary places. The cells, the bars, the watchtowers and high barbed-wire fences all have a way of communicating a simple, yet powerful message to those inside. “You’re not escaping this place.” But there are some prisons that don’t have cells -- that don’t have bars, that don’t have buzzed security doors, that have no watchtowers or barbed wire. They have none of that, but they are prisons nonetheless. These kinds of prisons aren’t made out of stone or cement. No, they’re made by our hearts and minds, built by the memories that we carry with us in our heart -- the memories of either things that we’ve done to others or the things that they have done to us. These prisons are scary places, too. But our God has given us what we need to be set free from these prisons. The message of our Savior breaks open the cells of guilt and tears down the prison walls of bitterness. Yes, forgiveness sets you free. That’s what we’ll see as we look at this account of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 50.

**Genesis 50:15-21** When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “It may be that Joseph will hate us and will pay us back in full for all of the evil that we did to him.” <sup>16</sup> They sent the following message to Joseph: “Before he died your father commanded us, <sup>17</sup> ‘You are to tell Joseph, “Please forgive the offense of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.”’ Now, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup> His brothers also came and fell down in front of him, and they said, “See now, we are your servants.” <sup>19</sup> Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring this to pass and to keep many people alive, as it is this day. <sup>21</sup> Now therefore, do not be afraid. I will nourish you and your little ones.” He comforted them and spoke to them in a kind way.

One of 12 sons of his Father, Joseph was the favorite. His father wasn’t afraid to show it. Joseph wasn’t afraid to remind his brothers of the fact. It would be like me always taking the same one of my 4 kids to Culver’s and then that child walking around the house every day with the recently emptied dish, showing it to their siblings. How are you going to feel about your brother in that instance? It’s natural for children to think that their siblings are the favored ones, but here it was proven. You would be jealous, right? Certainly Joseph’s brothers were. So, one day, they sold him as a slave to some foreigners who were travelling through to Egypt and then told their father he was dead.

So Joseph ends up in Egypt as a foreigner and a slave. And, long story short, he uses his gifts and talents to bloom where he was planted and ends up being promoted to the #2 man in all of Egypt, behind only the King, only the Pharaoh. In that position he makes and enacts a plan to store up lots of food so that there would be food in the land through 7 years of famine. So the famine comes, and Joseph’s estranged family back home start to run out of food. Hearing that there is food in Egypt, they go there. They meet Joseph, and find out he’s alive. Joseph assures his brothers he’s forgiven them and has his family move to Egypt and settle there to survive the famine. It’s now been 17 years since they all packed up and

moved to Egypt. It's been about 40 years since they sold Joseph as a slave. Now, their father is gone and what are Joseph's brothers worried about?

They say, **"It may be that Joseph will hate us and will pay us back in full for all of the evil that we did to him."** Even after all those years, their feelings of guilt over what they had done to Joseph are still haunting them. They couldn't erase the memories of what they had done to Joseph. They were living in a prison of their own guilt. This prison put them in constant fear of retribution. And this fear affected the way they saw reality. Joseph had already assured them that he was not out to get them. He had given them the best land in all of Egypt. For 17 years, he made sure they had food to eat and were provided for. But, in their fear, the brothers were absolutely convinced -- or at least worried that all of that was just a show and that now that their father was gone, Joseph was going to have his revenge.

Do you ever find yourself in a prison like that? A prison of your own guilt? We've all said and done things in life that we regret -- and, no matter how long ago those events took place, we can still replay the scene in our minds like it was yesterday, and all the feelings of embarrassment and shame and guilt over what happened get called up to the surface. Then it's so easy to become convinced that whoever it was that we might have wronged is in some way now waiting on the right opportunity to get even; and that any kindness shown toward you must be only superficial and shallow. The prison of guilt quickly becomes a lonely place to be.

So, what's the way out of there? How can we be set free from it? The first step is quite simple, at least in theory: Admit it. Look at the brothers' message to Joseph. What do they finally admit to him? They finally admit that they did evil to him all those years ago. This is the first time in 40 years that they say anything of the sort. So, for us, the first step in being set free from the prison of guilt is honestly admitting what we did -- to the person who we hurt if it's possible, and definitely to God. It doesn't have to be anything fancy or elegant. It can just be, "I know that at this time in the past, I said and/or did this that hurt you. It was wrong of me and I'm sorry. Please forgive me." Before God it can simply be, "I hurt my friend when I did this thing. It was wrong. Please forgive me." And when we ask forgiveness from God, we can be absolutely certain of his answer. The Bible says, **"If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us of all unrighteousness."** That's a promise that if we confess our sins to God, he will forgive us. He forgives us and purifies us on the basis of the life and death of Jesus his Son. Jesus died for all of your sin and guilt and because of that, we can always confess our sin and guilt to God, knowing that he does not hold it against us but forgives us. God's forgiveness sets you free from the prison of our guilt.

Now, when we ask forgiveness from humans, we're not always sure how it's going to turn out. That was how Joseph's brothers felt when they finally confessed their guilt to him. How would he respond? It would have been so easy for Joseph to respond with bitterness and resentment about what had happened to him and what they had done to him. And this is like a prison too. Past hurts control and color every interaction that we have with that person now and into the future. I remember at the first congregation I served, about 10 years before I arrived there, there was a major division in the congregation, and, of course, people were on both sides. Almost 20 years later, there were still families who couldn't see how those people who had been on the other side of the

divide so long ago could do anything right or good for the congregation now. They were still upset about what had happened 20 years prior that it colored and controlled how they viewed others still to that day. That's the prison of bitterness and resentment. It is consumed with making people pay for what they've done.

So where was Joseph? Instead of being imprisoned by bitterness, Joseph forgave them. Isn't that remarkable? Forgiveness set him free from that prison of bitterness. So how did he do it? First, some practical steps, then the driving force behind it. There are three actions that allow Joseph to forgive. First, notice the first thing he says to his brothers. He says, "**Am I in the place of God?**" By saying this, Joseph is acknowledging that revenge is God's job, not his. Revenge is God's job because only he has all the facts about a given situation. Only he can see through all the spin. Only he can truly know what a person's motivations were. So the first practical step in forgiving is to let God be God. Let the revenge over what happened belong to him. Next, Joseph says, "**You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good -- to bring about the saving of many lives.**" Joseph here is taking God's view of things. God sees all of your life and all the world like he's looking down on it from the top of a hill. He can see where you are, where you've been, and where you're ultimately going to end up -- and what all of it is ultimately going to accomplish in your life and the lives of others. Taking God's view let Joseph see the good that God had worked out as a result of the hurtful thing his brothers had done. Finally, Joseph "**Comforted them and spoke kindly to them.**" He reinforced with his actions that he had forgiven them. And this final step shows us a powerful truth -- forgiveness is given before it is felt. The more we put into actions words and deeds of forgiveness toward those who have wronged us, the more we will feel like we can forgive them. Forgiveness is given before it is felt.

So, have you ever been hurt? Have you ever been betrayed? Have you ever been let down? Have you been on the receiving end of evil in words or actions? We all have -- each of us in our own ways. The bigger question is how do you look at the person who did it? We're good at saying the right things, but still holding bitterness in our hearts. We're good at replaying the scene over and over again in our minds to keep the hurt fresh. We're good at holding the person to a higher standard because we feel they have a debt to pay. We're good at avoiding them or being less than warm toward them. Breaking that cycle and forgiving is hard. How can we do it? What's the driving force behind actually forgiving someone?

It's knowing how much you've been forgiven by God. Joseph had to have looked back on his life and known that he had made his own contribution to the way his brothers felt about him. He had to have looked back and reflected on how in words and deeds he reminded his brothers that he was dad's favorite. Not only that, I'm sure that Joseph was aware of all the smaller times that he was proud, maybe manipulative, maybe coarse or uncaring toward others in his life. He was aware of it all and remembered a promise that had been made to his Father. God was going to send a savior -- one who would forgive all of his sins and offenses before God. And we know that Savior is Jesus. So we can look back on our lives and reflect on all the ways that we've contributed to the hurt in our lives. We can look back with awareness of all the times we've been cold or uncaring to others, all the ways that we've let people down, and all the ways we've clung to bitterness against those who have wronged us, and all the times that we've hurt others without even realizing it. WE can see how all our sins piled up into a mountain's worth -- and know that Jesus came and he bore

the guilt of those sins. He died on the cross under their curse. And now we're forgiven. The mountain of our sin is gone, done away with, never to be seen again. Only when you know how much God has forgiven you are you free to let God be God, to take his view, and to do kindness toward those who have wronged you. God's Forgiveness sets you free by giving you the power to forgive those who have hurt you.

Forgiveness can't change the past, but it has the power to change the future. It sets you free from the prison of your guilt over what you've done. When you know how much God has forgiven you, it empowers you to forgive others, setting you free from the prison of bitterness and resentment over what others have done to you. Yes, forgiveness -- God's forgiveness sets you free. Amen!