

Forgiveness is a Family Affair

‡ **Deeply needed in the family of man (vv.15-18)**

‡ **Deeply rooted in the heart of God’s family (vv.19-21)**

In the name of Jesus, our all-forgiving, ever-loving Savior, dear children of the heavenly Father:

This Sunday after Labor Day that begins our Fall education program mixes up my emotions. On the one hand I’m glad to see children of all ages back in Sunday School and Bible Class, eager to learn more of what Jesus has done for us all. On the other hand I feel great sadness for everyone who turned down God’s invitation to join us in His house on the Lord’s Day. God has chosen to channel His blessings to us through the Word and sacrament tools of the Holy Spirit. These He has kindly entrusted to His Church on earth to bring great blessings to one and all.

But what keeps people away? What tugs so hard at our hearts to make such a struggle of coming for God’s blessing? Boil down all the reasons we might list and the truth is that we just don’t feel the need. Human beings have a false sense of security even in a city below sea level with a hurricane bearing down on crumbling levees and corrupt officials. We don’t stock enough water for the storms of life. So if the mortgage is paid and the gas tank is full, who feels the need for God when His sun is shining?

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That’s how it had been for the family of Jacob the Hebrew back home in Canaan. His sons had families of their own growing up on rich pasture land for their bulging flocks and herds. Mostly the neighbors left them alone to graze the open range. Sure there were the usual family squabbles, but nothing really bugged them except one thing. Brother Joseph had dreams about ruling over their family.

As now, so then, when you’re living in the middle of history, you don’t realize the importance of events. No one but Reuben, the oldest brother, seemed to stop and think, “What are we doing?” when they grabbed Joseph, tore off his “Technicolor dream coat” from their father Jacob, and sold him sniffing and crying to slave traders bound for Egypt. “We’ll see what happens to his dreams now!”

Terrible, terrible scenes occur inside our four walls at home. Awful things are said while driving when we think no one else will hear. We come to church all polished up and smiling, but would you want God to replay the video of this past summer? Our own harsh words we tend to forget and ignore. But we fail to realize that although we may have erased the tape from our minds, God has the original. His memory chips record sins before “baby” status when DNA from Mom and Dad first mixed into the tiny strands that would be me. Sinners then. Sinners now. Do we want our sins to be seen on the big screen?

Joseph’s brothers could only remember his sale into slavery. They could not know the shame he felt when it seemed his life had finally turned around but then he was thrown into an Egyptian prison on false rape charges. Twenty years passed without seeing his father, languishing in a dungeon from which many never got out alive. But Joseph kept clinging to God’s promises. Even though everyone else kept forgetting him, the dear Holy Spirit miraculously kept Joseph’s hopes alive with God’s Word. But it would take an even greater miracle for Joseph to finally forgive the unforgivable especially when their father Jacob passed away. The brothers fully expected they would “have hell to pay.” They deserved it.

You may say, “Well, I’m not Jesus Christ. I can forgive, but I can’t forget.” But then Jesus says you’re not forgiven. The real problem is not what others have done to you, but that you do not admit the horrendous debt you owe to God because of your sins. Because we cannot see even a small fraction of our own sins, the unvarnished truth is this: **Forgiveness is a Family Affair – Deeply needed in the family of man.** Without digging too deep we find our sins hurting us, our families and mostly our God.

After father Jacob died, the brothers knew that Joseph, now Prime Minister of Egypt, could use his power to destroy them and their families. With nowhere to hide, felt the deep need to appeal to the kindness that Joseph had been showing for so many years after their first family reunion. Even more, they appealed to the Name of their forgiving God. On their faces before Joseph they pleaded with words their father gave them: *“I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.’ Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.”* Do you hear this prayer that we need for God today? *“Forgive the sins”* – not mistakes, not bad choices, but damnable *“sins”* for which we deserve eternal punishment from God in hell. But *“forgive”* because we are *“servants,”* beggars one and all with nothing to offer God to repay our debt of sin. Yet we too are *“servants of the God,”* the one and only Savior-God. And Joseph, if you don’t forgive, you break the heart of our father who asked this. *When their message came to him, Joseph wept.*

✠ **Deeply rooted in the heart of God’s family (vv.19-21)**

The first step back to God and back to family health and happiness is to admit we’re wrong. We don’t have to dissect every word and action. Sometimes we just need to say, “I’m sorry for my part in this,” even if we aren’t always totally sure what that part was. After all, even the psalmist David had to admit, *“Who can understand his errors? Forgive my hidden faults.”* (Psalm 19:12) And Joseph is a beautiful example of how eager God is to do exactly that.

The only thing harder to understand than our *hidden faults* is God’s glorious grace and mercy that wants to cover them with the blood of Jesus Christ and then wash them all away. Joseph’s first words are what the angels said to the shepherds outside Bethlehem on Christmas Eve. This is what the LORD was doing for Adam and Eve when their sin and shame fooled them into trying to hide from God in the Garden paradise of Eden. *“Don’t be afraid,”* Joseph said, as he echoed the Good News of God’s forgiveness in Christ that takes away our fears and makes life worth living once again.

Then kindhearted Joseph had a question for them? “I may be Prime Minister of Egypt, but *am I in the place of God?* How can I judge you when God has turned your sins against me into such a blessing?” God’s mercy and forgiveness are very realistic. He doesn’t make sin seem okay. Sin is deadly and deserving of damnation. But God’s mercy is even greater. In fact, *“where sin abounded, God’s grace did much more abound.”* (Romans 5:20 KJV) *“You intended to harm me,”* Joseph admitted to his brothers. They all knew that was true. *“But God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”* God does not cause evil, but He allows it to happen like a championship wrestler allowing his opponent to push him toward the mat. Then at the last second God pulls a reverse that flattens our old evil foe on his back and raises our hand in victory. God would not let Jacob’s family be destroyed even by the worst treachery of sibling rivalry. For God had promised that the Savior of all of us sinners would come from such a sinful family that none of us would ever have to feel left out or unforgiven by God. He used Joseph’s slavery and rise to power to bring the chosen people of God down to Egypt to escape a terrible famine and the loss of the promise of the Savior.

“So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. Can you feel *“the peace of God that surpasses all understanding”*? That *“guards our hearts and minds by faith in Christ Jesus”*? (Philippians 4:7)

Four years ago a woman’s husband died in the 9/11 disaster. She tried to get him back by spending the five million dollars from his brokerage firm and insurance. She has no anchor to hold her now for the deeply needed forgiveness that could give her peace. Pray for her and countless millions like her. For all who know our Savior Jesus Christ enjoy the peace of sins forgiven and the hope of everlasting life with God and all believers in heaven. Truly, **Forgiveness is a Family Affair** – so **Deeply rooted in the heart of God’s family**, that we can only sing for joy on our beds, as the psalmist says, even in the darkest night. This is the undeserved love that turns our tragedies into blessings, all God’s good work and saving purpose. Make sure God’s Name always shines as your family name. Amen.