

+ In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti + Amen.

Text: Genesis 45:5
Theme: God's Plan



Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

The best laid plans can be shattered in a moment. Life is full of uncertainties. We are susceptible to all kinds of vulnerabilities. Efforts to manage Covid-19 are certainly proving that. Securities we normally take for granted are not necessarily givens. People can't even seem to control their urge for panic buying. Everything we have is a gift. from God. That's the key point. Whether we are enjoying prosperity or enduring adversity, gratitude for God's blessings and greater dependence on His provision is always the Spirit's goal for us. Life is not meant to be lived aimlessly or purposelessly, hopelessly, or fruitlessly. It is a gift.

Today, the best laid plans of the brothers of Joseph were shattered. It's an epic biblical story. Jealous of him because, as the youngest, he was favoured by his father, the brothers of Joseph sold him into slavery, and he ended up Egypt. Some had contemplated his murder. But Reuben, the oldest, convinced them not to go through with it. So, off to Egypt Joseph went. Problem solved. But, not quite. God prospered Joseph and in Egypt he became a powerful man, answering only to Pharaoh. Along comes a famine and these sons of Jacob travel down to Egypt to buy grain. Low, and behold, who is in charge of distributing it, Joseph.

The greatest fear of Joseph's brothers was now realized. The brother they despised, the brother they were jealous of, the brother whose murder some of them plotted, the brother who they were relieved to send away to Egypt never to trouble them again, was the one who now had complete authority to take revenge. Joseph is in the position of power and if he cared to hold a grudge no one stop him, and few would blame him. They were suddenly very vulnerable. Of course, God intended this to bring about their repentance. Were they fearing more than just retribution from Joseph? Perhaps they felt their souls were in danger of judgment from God Himself? After Joseph revealed himself to them with loud weeping, the text says, "*His brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.*"¹

Yet, and probably to their astonishment, instead of punishment, Joseph offers them forgiveness. Instead of seeking revenge, he offers reconciliation. Instead of imprisoning them, he provides for their future. He says, "*Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.*"² Joseph saw the bigger picture. God had brought good out of the evil they had perpetrated.

How would you have fared as Joseph? Are you good at forgiving others? *“Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us,”*³ we pray. But could you forgive someone who plotted your downfall? What about someone who planned your murder? Do we not often have difficulty forgiving even for minor infractions? What about the brothers? When was the last time your conscience went through a serious struggle with sin? When did you last really grapple with guilt? When did you devote more than just a passing reflection on your need for forgiveness?

Dear friends, the account of Joseph and his brothers is more than just an interesting tale with a heart-warming ending. It illustrates the central struggles and blessings of all people. We struggle with sin: Accepting, it, owning it, managing the damage it causes in our relationships. We struggle to genuinely forgive others who come to us for pardon. It is a difficult thing to believe we are sinners worthy of condemnation. Why do you think it is that even with Covid restrictions eased that churches aren't full to the limit? It's an even harder thing to believe that we are forgiven by grace, for Jesus' sake. We can do neither without the Holy Spirit. I suppose it seems easy to expect forgiveness from God if we don't really think our offences are that great. But that is no real faith. Faith is never presumptuous, but always grateful. It is never demanding, but always humble.

From the cross Jesus said, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”*⁴ Imagine saying that while experiencing death by crucifixion! Were truer or more gracious words ever spoken? They were executing the holy Son of God, and yet He pleads for their pardon. If you're having trouble grasping the significance of this because First Century criminal behavior isn't relevant to you or the death of Jesus happened two thousand years ago, pray that the Holy Spirit would impress it on you because this same Jesus was sacrificed for you. Your sins and mine also put Him on the cross. He didn't die for the innocent; He died for sinners. He died for us. If there were other ways to be reconciled to God, Christ wouldn't have died.

Dear friends, if the threatened punishment against sin is not real, if eternal separation from God is not imminent for those who remain unforgiven, then the entire life and work of Jesus- His incarnation, His suffering, His death, resurrection, and ascension- become unnecessary. Jesus Himself makes so many references to hell that one cannot really believe in the biblical Jesus without believing hell exists. Not that Herculean efforts to do so haven't been well resourced for a long time. Hardly anyone dies without the immediate affirmation that they have “gone to a better place”. Cordial sensitivity to the bereaved is understood. But on what authority and basis are such statements made? And do we really believe them? Dear friends, if we could truly understand what we are spared from through Christ's saving work we would never cease praising God. Our repentance would be more urgent. Our humility would be more authentic. Our eagerness to serve others would be more evident.

Christian living, living by faith, baptismal living is a daily engagement of the struggle between sin and forgiveness, between truth and falsehood, between selfishness and sacrifice, between putting down permanent roots and recognizing this is not our true home. In relation to his brothers, Joseph was in the place of God. God used him to rescue them. God uses means to rescue, love, and nurture His people. The water of baptism is the means He uses to initially rescue from Satan's dominion (as He's done for Hugo today) and adopt us into His family. He uses His proclaimed word to absolve sinners of their guilt and free them to really live as children of the gospel. He uses the means of bread and wine to bless people with the body and blood of His Son, strengthening their faith and sustaining their souls.

Joseph did test the integrity of his brothers by asking them to Benjamin to him. Even so, from a human standpoint, he wasn't obligated to be reconciled to them. But divine love acts differently, it doesn't restore based on merit but on need. You aren't forgiven because your repentance is more sincere, your pleas for pardon are more fervent, or your efforts to make amends are more exemplary. You are forgiven because God says so. The word of absolution stands on the authority of the crucified and risen Jesus. The declaration of pardon is valid because Christ staked His life on it. It doesn't matter if you're not yet feeling the joy or levity of being restored. Take God at His word. Believe His promise. Live accordingly.

Dear friends, if certainty depended upon our own judgments, our own feelings, our own assessments of what's good enough, valuable enough, or true enough, when could we ever have certainty? Humans are as changeable as the coronavirus numbers and associated restrictions. But the faithfulness of God doesn't change. His love is immeasurable. His truth is immovable. His promises are unshakeable. Our best laid plans can be shattered in a moment. But the plans of God will never fail to come to pass. Amen.

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost
16th August, 2020
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¹ Genesis 45:3
³ Matthew 6:12

² Genesis 45:5
⁴ Luke 23:34

