

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost – Sarah Stone

Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 103:8-13; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

Good morning St. Paul's! I'm super excited to be here worshipping with you this morning, and to be wearing one of these guys. I looked it up to see what it was officially called so I would sound like I know what I'm talking about, but I think it might just be called a robe. Anyways, my name is Sarah Stone and I am a senior at Greenville University, formerly known as Greenville College. I sure wish they'd put up a few signs to make that transition more obvious. I should also let you know that you need to bear with me today, I'm a little nervous—mostly because basically all of my professors go here. So if this goes poorly, they taught me everything I know. Just kidding, we'll have fun, this will be great.

We have several scriptures we've heard today, and when I was going over them in my preparation for today, I felt like there is an overarching theme of forgiveness and mercy. So let's set up what's going on here in Joseph's story in Genesis. This is very near the end of Genesis. Joseph's dad has just died and he is, naturally, very sad. But his brothers—remember those guys, the ones who sold him into slavery?—they're scared now that their dad has died. They're freaked that Joseph is going to extract revenge on them for how horribly they treated him. So they go to him and fall to his feet and basically beg him to not punish them. They even fib a little about their father's last words to the brothers. But regardless, Joseph starts crying too—but for different reasons. He's like, "My brothers still don't understand." He says that God took their bad intentions and turned them to good ones. He reassures them and speaks to them kindly. ("What a brother am I," right?) He tells them that even though they sold him into slavery... Which sometimes we kind of skate over, how sticky some of these family situations in the Bible are; like, our lives are just as sticky. How we interact with our family, how we were raised and treated—those things have repercussions, which can be positive or negative.

Joseph's brothers' actions towards him definitely had some repercussions down the road. His brothers wanted him to have a terrible life. Slavery was only one step up from their original plan, which was no life at all. They were going to kill him. His brothers had so much hate and jealousy in their hearts that they'd rather have had Joseph live the life of a slave. I mean, guys, a slave wasn't even considered a whole person, they were property. Joseph's brothers really had it against him. And can you imagine the hurt, bitterness, betrayal, and anger Joseph must have felt? How can we find it in our hearts to forgive someone after they have made us feel so terribly, so hurt, so dispensable?

Yet, here we are towards the end of Genesis. Years after being sold into slavery, now a helper of the king of Egypt, Joseph is in front of his brothers after his father's death. And again, they fear his potential retribution. But instead of revenge, Joseph weeps and says God used their intentions for good, to save a people. And he says he will treat them and their families well. They have nothing to fear.

You know, something that I've noticed is we are all really quick to talk about giving forgiveness, but what about when we are the ones who need forgiving? Forgiveness is hard. On both sides. We can ask for forgiveness with God. We're okay at that. Confessing to God, because we know

we need to do that. But what about when we need to ask our brothers and sisters to forgive us? Sometimes we have so much pride that we're like, "Nah, what makes them better than me? What makes them deserve me coming to them and asking for forgiveness??" (...which is funny, because we didn't deserve God's, but we still received that). We rationalize. We justify our actions—because we are bad at admitting, and not great at confessing our own faults to another sister or brother.

We have a prayer, that we read every week, or more often for some, that helps us confess; we pray to God to forgive us. In Matthew 6, we see one of the Lord's prayers: *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation.* We are invited here to ask for forgiveness, and grant it to those who have sinned against us. I mean, this is all across the gospel, we are constantly given this gift of forgiveness, and invited to use it often and well. But how do we do that?

The messiness of forgiveness: forgiveness is a process, and for that reason it can be kind of messy (essential, but messy). Psalm 103 tells us about the mercy and grace of God.

What is mercy? Well, I looked it up and it said, "An expression of fear or surprise," and I was, like, "Wait, what?" (It was talking about when people use it like Uncle Jesse in "Full House" uses it. You know... "Have mercy.") But then I read further, and it says it's an act of compassion or forgiveness granted to someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm—so someone who could easily punish you, but forgives you instead. It is an act, a muscle, something you need to work at.

The first line we hear from today's psalm is, *The Lord is merciful and gracious.* This is one of those scriptures where we don't have to dig too deep to get to the root—pretty straightforward. And if our God gives us such grace and mercy, that we really don't deserve, don't you think it's important that maybe we give our brothers and sisters the same kind of love? Because mercy and grace are a form of love. Grace is a free and no-strings-attached kind of pardon almost...

Now, Joseph's not punishing his brothers?—mercy, because he could have punished them. They could have suffered at his hand. Christ dying for us?—grace. Now we're getting to the Good News, because, I mean, these things that are at the root of forgiveness, they're what forgiveness stems from. Mercy and grace are also at the root of our gospel. Grace and mercy are rooted and deeply intertwined with love. It's an act of love to extend grace to someone. So when you're forgiving, it's not just forgiveness, you're loving your sister or brother.

But the psalmist goes on to say that God is *slow to anger* and *abounding in ... love.* *He will not accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.* He doesn't use our sins against us—thank goodness! This psalm tells us of just how merciful our God is. I don't know about you, but I don't deserve that. But stick with me here, the Bible gives us some examples of how to live, right? If God doesn't use our sins against us, then who are we to use our brothers' and sisters' sins against them? Who are we to not show mercy and grace? We aren't perfect, we've hurt people, too. Romans says it too, we are not to judge our brothers and sisters. We have no room to be doing

that. Paul says, *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.*

Now I've said this is a process; as with any process, there are things to try to avoid—such as fake forgiveness, which is like giving someone forgiveness, but not working towards meaning it. But most of our forgiving errors come when we are the ones asking for forgiveness. Gaining true forgiveness takes confessing—or, the truth. Humans have a hard time confessing their faults, especially when it's harmed someone else. Sometimes it's denied, avoided, "I didn't hurt you." Or sometimes it's rationalized, "I get it, I hurt you, I'm sorry, but you did..." "I'm sorry but..." is not how you start an apology, but by acknowledging why you're in the wrong, taking responsibility for your actions, confessing your sin to your sister or brother.

So what does that look like on a bigger scale? Well, sometimes we need to confess as a people, as a church, for the hurt and pain we've caused others. How do we do that? How do we convince an entire body of people to admit to their wrongdoings and faults? How do we acknowledge the sin in our body of people? We don't like to do that, do we? We can pass the peace with each other in here, but we have an awfully hard time passing the peace with people outside these walls—because that would require us acknowledging the hurt we've caused to an entire body of people beyond the church.

My mentor, Ashley Morgan Kirk, lives in St. Louis, in an area where there have been quite a few protests these past few days. And she was telling me that the morning the verdict was announced, she was woken up by the sound one of her black neighbors, crying, "Not guilty?" over and over again. This nation has hurt a group of people, over and over and over. They hurt. We have no right to tell them their pain and hurt, caused by this nation, and the people in it, is not valid. Because it is valid. And it's time we confess to our brothers and sisters, and stand with them, for them, and hurt with them.

But guess what? God invites us to ask for forgiveness. He calls us to repair and mend because that is how we grow closer to him. We have to mend if we want to be a functioning body of Christ. We need to be working our forgiveness muscle. And that means being forgiven and giving forgiveness; both of those are forgiveness muscles. It's like when people go to the gym and they say, "Don't skip leg day." Don't skip practicing one type of forgiveness over the other! We need both to be strong, in order for us to be healthy.

I want to share a story about when I forgave someone. And this isn't to be, like, "Oh, wow, Sarah, you're so good, you forgave someone." Yeah, no. I was bad at it. At first I was like, mmm hmm, yes, Jesus tells us to forgive 77 times. I'm a do this. I was under the impression that if I forgave this person, then all of my hurt would go away—poof, vanish. Uh, no. Forgiveness is an ugly process. Regardless of this person's intentions, after their actions, I felt hurt, betrayed and alone. And after forgiving them, guess what? Those feelings did not go away. Actually, some were even added to the mix. There was some bitterness thrown in, a dash of anger. And some of that anger was towards myself. I was, like, "Uh, Sarah. You've forgiven this person, you should not be having these feelings still."

It probably took me about a year to truly forgive that person. No matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't clean that wound left by their actions with only three words, "I forgive you," because it is an act, not just a phrase. It began my process of forgiveness, yes. But forgiving isn't a once-and-done thing. It's a constant, conscious decision, you have to decide work towards forgiveness.

Jesus says that we need to forgive someone 77 times, and I was reading a commentary that said that means that eventually, if you keep multiplying, in theory it reaches an incalculable number. So we aren't supposed to keep track of the number of times we forgive someone. We're just supposed to do it. And I think Christ is also hinting that it'll take more than one time for us to get there.

So, see what I mean? There are an awful lot of things that factor into this process. And on the other side of this, there's the "forgivee"—regretting their hurtful actions, wanting that person's forgiveness and trust back—becoming impatient when that person is taking longer than you want to let you back in. But someone can forgive you, and still not trust you. Just because someone says the words, "I forgive you," doesn't mean you're immediately back in with them. Forgiveness takes work.

We've got a parable here today, too, and man, I love parables. But first, I would like to talk a little about what exactly a parable is, and why Jesus decided to speak in so many. A parable, in short, is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, when two things that seem different are JUXTA-POSED in order to connect them—so kind of like an analogy or a metaphor but expanded. Typically they are fictional. But Jesus speaks in parables to bring to light common everyday things and put a heavenly meaning within it. The people Jesus was teaching were used to hearing things in story form. (That is how we got the Old Testament, stories passed down from generation to generation; it was how people were used to learning.) Also, Jesus liked to be a vague kind of guy. He didn't mind being confusing, so sometimes it was harder to discern what he was saying with his parables.

And today we're looking at a parable in Matthew 18:21-35. Right before this parable Jesus is asked, by Peter, how many times we're supposed to forgive someone who has sinned against us. Peter asked if it's seven times, and he was probably kinda like, "This is the right answer," and Jesus is, like, "Try 77." And then he launches into a parable about a servant asking his master to have patience with him, because he will eventually pay back his debts. (And here's where that whole heavenly meaning thing comes into play, because both the servant and the master are aware that these debts are literally not able to be paid by this servant—sounds kind of like Christ dying for humanity's debts, right?) But anyways, the master takes pity on the servant and cancels his debt. But then, this servant goes around to a bunch of people who owe him money and absolutely does not forgive them their debts. "Sir, were you or were you not literally just in this position?" I mean, talk about a classic human move here! It kind of makes you laugh, or roll your eyes a little bit, but, um... we all do what he did. Maybe not in such obvious or extreme ways as this, but we, as humans, have a harder time forgiving than being forgiven. "Yes, yes, everyone should forgive me, after all I'm only human! But that person over there, who has sinned against me? No, they should've known better." BUT, Christ is compelling us to act as he acts. He gives forgiveness, and expects us to do the same, over again, for our sisters and brothers.

Forgiveness is an act of love. It's a result of mercy and grace, and therefore a way of showing love to our brothers and sisters. Don't hold onto that anger in your heart, because it'll hurt your heart, not the person's who hurt you. God doesn't hold anger, neither should we. Extend forgiveness, and by doing so you'll be extending love.

Let us pray.