

## Genesis 50:15-21

Ten years ago there were many who were questioning God. “What kind of God would allow terrorists to attack us like this?” “If God is merciful, how could He allow this tragedy to happen?” You heard such remarks, as did I. Perhaps thoughts and questions like these even made their way into our own minds. Satan, that day, was hard at work; but so was God. Satan was planning evil against us. God was bringing good out of that evil. Through those rescue workers who were saving lives that day, God was at work. And in the ten years since, He has brought about much more good through the wickedness which evil men carried out.

Today as we reflect on the events of a decade ago, we need to go back much further in time to a story that took place long before the World Trade Center towers were ever erected; long before America was even a nation; even before Christ was born of the Virgin Mary.

Joseph, one of Jacob’s sons, could have brewed day and night wondering why evil things happen; wondering how a merciful God could allow his brothers to plan and carry out such wickedness against him. Out of jealousy they sold him to slave traders. They wanted him out of their life. They could not stand even to look at him. They would have preferred that he was dead, but a caravan heading for Egypt became an easy solution to their wicked dilemma.

Ten years later, and even after that, God was working good through the wickedness of Joseph’s brothers. It did not happen overnight. But through Joseph, God rescued not only the nation of Egypt, but all the people around Egypt who were starving to death. Through Joseph, God rescued even his brothers and their families. They came to Egypt to live there, even Jacob, Joseph’s father. What a joyful reunion when father and son saw each other again.

But after a time Jacob died. And now, thought Joseph’s brothers, now our brother will take out vengeance upon us; he will hate us and punish us for what we did to him. And so they sent a messenger to Joseph: Please forgive us, they said, We did evil to you, but please forgive.

At this point could I not ask: What would you do if you were Joseph? I could, but I won’t. Instead I ask: What will you do, since you are Joseph? Again and again in your life, and in mine, we are placed into the exact same position. Someone wrongs us. They intend evil against us. Perhaps they are sorry, perhaps not. Every time someone sins against you, you are Joseph. Will you forgive, or not?

This really, even though it sounds like it, is not an either/or decision. Christians forgive, period. If you or I do not forgive, then we are not Christians. Forgiveness is a “must” in the life of Jesus’ disciples. Forgiveness is the ground we walk on. It is the air we breathe. A disciple who refuses to forgive marks himself, or herself, as one who is perishing; as one who is rejecting Christ. For Christ is forgiveness. God is merciful.

And so Joseph exclaimed to his brothers, “Am I in the place of God?” Even though they had tried to kill him and ended up selling him into slavery, Joseph did not have the option of holding a grudge. He did not have any authority to seek vengeance against them. Since God is merciful, Joseph could do nothing less than show mercy to his brothers.

I don’t think any of us here are holding a grudge against those who attacked us on 9/11. For one thing, Bin Laden is dead. Those who flew the airplanes into their human targets are dead. There are

some in that terrorist group still living, but even though they attacked our nation, they did not attack us personally. We find it much more difficult to forgive those who are close to us, than those who are far away from us. Our spouse, our parents, our children, our brothers and sisters, our neighbors, our coworkers, our classmates, our fellow congregational members, our pastor...these are the ones we have trouble forgiving. A fanatical madman kills thousands, and ten years later it hardly enters our thoughts anymore, but someone we know well--someone within our fellowship says one thing to offend us, and years later we're still holding on to a grudge against him or her.

What kind of person refuses to forgive? The person, as defined by Joseph, who does think that he, or she, is in the place of God; and who changes the very nature of God so that God ceases to be merciful and becomes a God of anger and vengeance. The person who refuses to forgive has this kind of God. This is the Muslim god...the kind of god who seeks to hurt and kill, who has no desire to show mercy. Anyone today, us included, who refuses to forgive those who sin against us will face this kind of a God in the Judgment. For if we do not show mercy, neither will God show mercy to us. If we hold a grudge, then God will hold a grudge against us. "If you do not forgive others," Jesus clearly says, "neither will your Father in heaven forgive you."

But how can we forgive when we're angry? How can we forgive when someone keeps hurting us? How are we expected to forgive when he, or she, appears not even to be sorry for their sins against us? Joseph did not forgive because his brothers asked him to. He was not their pastor and so could not forgive them unless they repented of their sins; he was their brother against whom they had sinned, and thus he had already forgiven them in his heart long ago. Joseph did not forgive because he had something that you and I do not have...some inner strength, some deeper motivation. No, Joseph forgave because he had the same thing we have--a merciful God. God forgives. Knowing this, believing this, Joseph could do nothing less than forgive his brothers. He did not forgive them partially. Not three-quarters of the way or seven-eighths. There are no half-forgiven sinners in God's church; only fully forgiven. And so Joseph did not hold onto a little bit of a grudge. Since God had forgiven him completely Joseph, living in God's mercy, completely forgave his brothers. Let go, therefore, of your refusals to forgive. Repent of any grudge, or any part of a grudge you are clinging to. God has completely forgiven you. Jesus died not just for some of your sins; He died for all of them.

This is the key, the answer to our dilemma. We will forgive when we breathe in the air of God's forgiveness for us. It is all about Jesus Christ. When He lives within you, He will forgive others through you. Joseph was Christ to his brothers. It wasn't Joseph, we can say, who was forgiving them; it was the Lord living within Joseph who was forgiving them. And so with you. I am not just looking at my fellow members here at Christ Lutheran; I am looking at people of God who become Christ to each other as you forgive each other. Whether it's here in church, or in Council and Voters meetings, or at home, or at school, at work, or in the marketplace, wherever you stand forgiving those who sin against you, there stands Christ with His mercy forgiving through you.

This does not take place in the Muslim world. They may strive to get along with each other and excuse each other's wrongs, but there is no Christian forgiveness because Christ Jesus and His cross is not preached there. It may not take place much either where you work, and where you sit in class to learn. It may not even take place much within our communities where strife, anger, and jealousy can win the day. But should it not take place daily within our homes? And here within Jesus' church? Because here Jesus is proclaimed. Here you are immersed in your Savior's mercy. Here His body and blood is given for you for the remission of your sins. Here God's servant absolves your sins

in His stead. Here God's grace in Christ Jesus always wins the day; it is the ground we walk on, the very air we breathe.

Jesus died for all, even for Muslims, even for those who terrorize us--but these do not believe it, and it does them no good. He died also for you. And because this you believe, by the grace of God, it will be evident in your life. You are forgiven, period. Every sin in your heart and life is forgiven. God is not half-merciful toward you; He knows nothing but mercy and forgiveness for you. There is no grudge, or part of a grudge He holds onto against you. For Jesus' sake, you are forgiven. And this is the reason; this is why you forgive. Amen.