

# Sermon Text for May 29, 2016

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2 Corinthians 5: 16-21. Genesis 33: 1-11

## **“Forgiveness”**

What a gathering we are having today. So much is at stake and so much can be offered. As we celebrate memorial day and remember those who served our country and gave their lives and that is juxtaposed with 8 baptisms where we lift up one who gave his life so that we can be redeemed. What we believe as Christians revolves around this concept that we have been forgiven by the blood of the lamb, we are beneficiaries of the greatest sacrifice of all time. This font represents that sacrifice and our taking on that sacrifice and claiming it as ours.

At the same time our country is at war right now. We forget that don't we. We have men and women who are representing us in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Ukraine, Easter Europe, who at any time might have the greatest sacrifice required of them. So how can we be at war and yet believe that God has blessed us, each of us personally through his son Jesus Christ with forgiveness and grace.

Our Scripture today is the second part of the encounter that Jacob was preparing for which we saw last week. It describes the meeting between Esau and Jacob. You should know by now that Esau had every right to go after Jacob, to hunt him down and kill him. But instead the meeting between these two brothers can only be described by one word and that is forgiveness. What we find here is forgiveness in its pure, unconditional form and as Jacob states, in a way that allows him once again to see the face of God.

Today we are going to learn about forgiveness, we find that it isn't cheap, it takes two, and how central it is to the Gospel message and to our life as we interact with those around us.

### **READ**

Forgiveness has been the topic of a myriad of conversations from the typical husband and wife squabble and other daily interpersonal situations to national forgiveness such as the concept of debt forgiveness where a country wipes the slate clean of any debt that another country may owe them. We have always heard that time heals

and sure enough this week with our president at Hiroshima one wonders how can there be forgiveness in that situation. But people have always had a lot to say about forgiveness. Jesus teaches his disciples to pray: forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. That has caused a lot of anxiety for people who take it seriously. There is an African proverb that states: He who forgives ends the quarrel. This shows that it is harder to forgive than to hate. A Japanese proverb tells us that forgiving the unrepentant is like drawing pictures on the water.

Oscar Wilde looked at the lighter side of forgiveness as he stated always forgive your enemies, nothing annoys them more. Martin Luther King stated that forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a permanent attitude. Gandhi stated: the weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong. William Blake finally stated it is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend.

Today in Genesis we find Jacob limping to meet Esau. He had been hiding out on the other side of the river, afraid, but today, after having wrestled with God and reformed or changed because of it and then stating that he had seen the face of God and survived, today he doesn't put himself at the end of the line. Look at the Scripture again. We read that he sees his brother who must be coming with vengeance on his mind with the 400 men coming his way. Jacob then divides his family and possessions in ascending order of importance. The maids and Jacobs children were in front, Leah and Jacobs children were next and then last were Rachel and Joseph. Notice that only Joseph is mentioned by name, it must mean that he was important and we see later on how important this Joseph becomes, and not just because he had a really neat overcoat.

Jacob then goes limping to the front of the line, ahead of everyone else, expecting the worse. He bows down seven times as a sign of his utter humility and servitude to his brother, and he waits for the blow to come. Jacob had prepared long and hard for this day. He had put all of his things in order and he was just waiting now for the worst to take place.

But Jacob knew that he deserved whatever happened because of the past history with his brother. He sees his brother and they make eye contact. His brother yells and then if Jacob didn't know better he would have thought that he smiled, but it must have been a grimace. He picks up his robe and starts running to him, Jacob bows down for the

seventh time, waiting for the inevitable blow that would end his life. But instead of a deadly blow he feels his brother surround him with his hairy bear like arms and hug him affectionately, he hugs his neck, he kisses him, and Jacob realizes that after 20 years even though he was not able to eliminate the guilt that he felt, his brother's resentment had long since vanished. He begins to weep with gratitude and his brother joins him weeping for joy.

What a scene. Can you imagine Esau's 400 men standing around ready for battle and watching these two grown men weep. They were probably thinking let's go and kill both of them. What began as a certain conflict ended in a joyful reunion. What happened for this to take place? And how can we use this scene of tremendous forgiveness impact the lives that we find ourselves living today. Is this helpful for us as we find ourselves constantly in a place where we need to forgive or at least feel like others should ask for forgiveness from us.

The answer to what happened can be seen in who initiates the act of forgiveness. It is Esau. The one who has been harmed, the one who has suffered the wrong needs to be the one who initiates the forgiveness. This sounds backwards doesn't it? You would think that the one who caused the harm would be the one who needs to initiate the process of forgiveness. Not so here in Genesis.

In fact we find in II Corinthians that we become a new creation because it is Almighty God who does not count our sins against us. We find ourselves squarely into baptism here. God the Father sent Jesus Christ his Son not because we were so contrite that we deserved to have our sins washed away by his blood on the cross. Our forgiveness through our Savior is solely God's initiative. It was God who decided to in Colossians 2 nail our sins to the cross as he himself was nailed to the cross. It wasn't anything that we did that convinced God that we actually deserved it. It wasn't even us saying..."I believe!" Instead it was the opposite, it was because we didn't deserve it that makes it that much more powerful, so much so that when we encounter God as Jacob encountered Esau our reaction should be one of weeping in recognition that in God's initiated forgiveness our sins are not counted against us. Do you believe that. Do you believe that we were forgiven based completely upon God's grace and mercy?

Jacob thought he could buy Esau's favor by surrounding him with gifts. He thought that he could somehow bribe Esau into forgiving him. But it isn't until after Esau has hugged his brother and obviously forgiven him that he looks around and says: what's all this about. I don't need it. Brothers and sisters, Christ Jesus can't be bribed with our good works, with our attendance, with our words, with anything. Our Savior wants our fellowship, he wants to come running from far off and hug our necks and kiss us and say I love you. Only God can release our sin because our sin has directly harmed only God.

But now where does that place us in relationship to us forgiving others? Is it really true that God forgives us as we forgive others? I John 4 tells us that those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. There is no wiggle room allowed in that Scripture. When Jesus in Matthew 18 speaks about forgiveness the question comes to him "Lord if another member of the church sins against me, how often shall I forgive?" The literal greek is brother, but I think member of the church is also very appropriate. The answer returns 70 times 7. God knows that we will receive forgiveness happily from our Savior, but we are very weak in forgiving those that need our forgiveness in our lives. Ultimately, who is it that suffers if we don't forgive? Esau was at peace with himself before he meets with Jacob. It is Jacob who is riddled with guilt and who suffers the most. Since Esau was at peace with himself he was able to be at peace with his brother. If you are not able to forgive it is your problem, you are the one who suffers and the one who is not at peace. Our inability to forgive reflects our weakness, our stubbornness, our sin and not the other persons. If we can forgive someone we can get on with life regardless of where they are in the process.

This brings us to today and our country as we celebrate Memorial Day. If forgiveness is not an occasional act but a permanent attitude, how do we change our attitude, our personal approach to those who are continuing to terrorize our nation, and to those who would want to hurt us?. I've said that we need to continue in our life as if nothing has changed, because Jesus Christ continues to rule in our lives and in this world. Today I am not making a political statement but rather a very personal spiritual one. If our beings are filled with hatred for the terrorists, that is not their problem, it is ours. If our lives are changed because we are more fearful, and anxious that is our problem.

Esau was wronged, we were wronged, God was wronged. Esau was at peace, we are filled with turmoil and hatred, God can give us peace. How do we forgive those who this Memorial Day killed our loved ones? Jacob was contrite, but Isis is not and we know they will continue to strike again. We are not contrite before God and in fact we will continue to sin again. God still loves us, and forgives us. Our role is to live as forgiven people not filled with hatred, but with a spirit of forgiveness and peace which allows us to go on with our lives in peace. It also allows us to remember with honor those service men and women who gave of their lives for our sake. Let's remember them now.