

Sermon Text for October 23, 2016

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

James 4:13-17, Genesis 50:1-3, 15-21

“What if...?”

On March 1 we began in Genesis 1 with a sermon called: In the Beginning, and we stripped the sanctuary bare, there was nothing, and no music, just the Word and it was the Word of God. We have worked our way through nearly 2 years later the entire book of Genesis. We have seen God at work through all of the Scriptures in both the Old and the New Testaments. We have heard of the witnesses of Jesus Christ from Adam to Ephraim. But, of course, today is not an ending, it is rather a beginning as we are able to once again reinforce our past themes of God’s presence in spite of our unfaithfulness.

Today we do get to be a part of the climax of Genesis. We have seen in these past years that God has been the source and presence of goodness in the world and in life and especially in our community. This goodness and life is then ultimately given to us in Jesus Christ as the covenant continues to today. Today we are able to handle, as a climax, one of the major themes of Scripture and that is the forgiveness of God.

Our Scripture tells us that God’s forgiveness is assured, complete, without need of a supplement, and it is an example we find from the person of Joseph. This forgiveness is understood completely in Jesus Christ. But sometimes our guilt gets in the way and we find ourselves asking the subtle questions...What if I need to do something more to have my sins forgiven. What if God has not forgotten my past and he will punish me later for my earlier sins? What if God does judge us as we judge other people? Hopefully today we will be assured of our forgiveness and be able to live a guilt free life.

I had lunch at the Swan yesterday. It was packed, and I had the best time spending time with fellow sinners. No one pretended anything, we just spoke about everything, me sipping on my coke and eating the massive spread of food that they had laid out after the funeral service over which I presided. I think I’m going to have my Friday lunches there and anyone who wants to join me is welcome, I’m serious, I’m going to have lunch there on Fridays when I’m in town.

We have a wonderful Scripture today. The topic focuses as we mentioned earlier on the issue of forgiveness, which is from a positive perspective, but it also deals with guilt that is part and parcel of forgiveness but from the negative perspective. Many

people have a problem dealing with guilt because they feel that what they have done is so heinous that no one else can compare to their sins, or that it really can't be as easy as confessing our sin and God takes it upon himself to be rid of that sin. Remember that first Sunday in Genesis where we wrote our sins upon the cross and we recognized that God just wanted to love us and that we were forgiven of our sins. That is all that it takes. But for some reason we spend our lives either punishing ourselves or with a sense of such low self-esteem due to our incredible guilt that we are carrying around with us.

This is true in the case of infidelity, while our spouse may forgive us, more often than not we may never be able to. Or even in cases where our childhoods have been marked by horrific actions of adults against us, while logically it could not have been our fault, or our sin, we carry that memory as if it were our fault and our sin. But some of us carry what I call passive guilt which is much more insidious because you don't know it exists until you realize you have a terrible self-esteem that won't fix itself.

This is the reality in which the brothers of Joseph find themselves. And we thought that after they realized who Joseph was and were able to express what it was that they had done, once they were forgiven directly by Joseph they could then go on with their lives. And they thought they had done that. But we begin the Scripture with the death of their father Jacob, who as we saw last week was not only the patriarch of the family, the one who held all of the brothers together, but he was also the spiritual cornerstone for that family. Once he dies and the 40 day embalming procedure takes place and they mourn him for 70 days, which incidentally is the amount of time that they mourned the death of a Pharaoh, the brothers start to get nervous. You can almost hear them whispering to each other...Uhm guys, what if, I mean hypothetically speaking of course, what if Joseph hasn't really forgotten that whole throwing him into the pit thing and selling him into slavery. I mean what if he still is a little bit upset about that and holds a bit of a grudge. I think we might be in trouble if he hasn't forgotten.

The brothers, understandably, are worried that Joseph was just being nice while dad was alive and out of respect for him. But once dad is gone then he can take his revenge upon them. It wouldn't be unusual. It had already happened once in their family. Just look at their Uncle Esau. Remember what happened when Esau found out that their father Jacob had stolen not only his birthright but also his blessing from their grandfather Isaac? Esau said, If I find Jacob I will kill him. Needless to say there is

some precedent for animosity between brothers in this family. Maybe Joseph's next step after burying his father is to go and bury his brothers.

The brothers decide that they were not going to sit around asking What if, but rather approach Joseph directly and see if he really meant what he said when he told them they were forgiven. They approach him, fall down before him, and ask him directly to forgive them for their past sins. The root of their problem is that Joseph has already told them over dinner that he loves them and that they are forgiven. But they are having a difficult time dealing with their own guilt. Notice, and this is something that we see time and time again, the ones with the issues are the ones who need to be forgiven, not the ones who should do the forgiving. It isn't Joseph's issue, the one who was wronged, it was the brothers who did the wronging who were struggling.

This is so true in many of us. We hear the assurance of pardon, we read the words of Scripture that we are washed clean as snow by the blood of Christ, we sing the songs that we were lost and now we are found, but we have a hard time forgiving ourselves for what we have done. Or we can't actually believe that God would still love us after all we have done and after we have run so far away. The brothers had to approach Joseph one more time because after all these years they still held onto their guilt. Joseph responds to them in such a way that allows them to not only understand that Joseph forgives them, but that they can actually forgive themselves and go on in life guilt free. We are going to look at this answer that Joseph gives them shortly.

Before we look at that I notice that all through Scripture we find ourselves in a tension between God forgiving our sins, which he does, and us being able to accept and live in light of that forgiveness. Hold your hands together and lets illustrate what exactly I mean when I say that we live in constant tension that Scripture commands us to live in. You are going to be an active part of today's sermon. Pull now, gently, on either side, do not let go until I tell you so. Keep pulling, gently. This tension that you feel is the struggle that we find in our daily lives and that Scripture speaks to.

We find ourselves living in a sinful world and committing sin, and yet God's grace constantly and consistently pulls us out of that sin. We find ourselves abiding by tradition and yet elements of regeneration and rebirth are all around us. We feel called to evangelism but not at the expense of social action, we are called to live in hope but we inhabit a world filled with despair, we are called to temper our eternal optimism with a

healthy realism. Fear and love, suffering and glory, are you starting to get tired? As you can tell it takes theological muscle to live in this world. You have to be in shape, you have to practice because our lives are filled with balancing acts that only God's word can lead and direct us to explain how we can go about living.

But today we deal with the guilt which can bring about despair and joylessness. There are some Christians who feel it is their responsibility to point out everything that is wrong in this world, to harp on the despair, the sadness, the depravity of humanity and the evil that is rampant in the world. Every time you sit down with them or encounter them you leave more depressed than before you saw them. There are Christians with this attitude. At the core of the pessimist, at the foundation of the one who always has a negative outlook and miserable attitude is someone who ultimately is carrying guilt that they are not able to get rid of. It is someone struggling with a sense of inadequacy that requires them to point out the fault in others and focus on that. Not even the love of Christ is somehow able to fill the void in their life that would make them have an approach to life where Christ has already won. Isn't our task to preach the Good News? The good news that Jesus came to remove our sin, our guilt, to eliminate the nagging what ifs so that we can be assured of God's forgiveness for us no matter what the situation or the circumstance. Isn't this our task? Yes it is.

Joseph gives us words today that allows the Good News to be spread to all people and to allow us to live guilt free lives and finally be able to forgive ourselves. The first thing that Joseph says when his brothers come to him and tell him that they have not been able to forgive themselves are words that I call salvation words: Do not be afraid. All throughout Scripture God is telling us not to be afraid. It is fear that prevents us from knowing God. Our fear of being rejected by others, our fear of change, our fear of the unknown, our fear of having to give too much up, our fear of losing control of our church, our fear of not knowing what to do when our kids aren't happy and lashing out at anything that is an easy target. When fear is removed, Christ can take its place. Joseph tells his brothers, do not be afraid, even if I wanted to hurt you I couldn't because you may have intended evil but God turned it into good.

You see that which we may have a hard time forgiving ourselves for in the past God has already used and shaped for his own purposes. If God has been able to forgive us, then we ought to be able to eliminate that nagging question of what if. It is that

question which decimates the future. The what if question which then lays out the worst case scenario. What if someone gets hurt? What if and then you can fill in your worst nightmare.

The forgiveness that we receive does not come as a result of what we are or what we do but solely because of God's grace. Remember in Jeremiah we read that God's plans are for our welfare and not for harm to give us a future with hope.

From the cross God speaks kindly to us. As we look to our lives and at times wonder: what if God's love is limited, what if God's forgiveness is conditional, God responds by saying my love is sufficient. Our ability to forgive ourselves after we know that God has forgiven us lies in the words of salvation that tell us to not be afraid because I want you to have a future of hope. It does not leave room for the what ifs which wreck our future. Our doubts, our feelings of inadequacy and even our guilt is all taken to Christ who overcome not because of what we have done, but because of what he has done for us. Amen.