

A Master Class in Mercy

Text: Genesis 50:15-21

Hymn: "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" (LSB 700)

What comes to mind when I say the words, "Hatfields and McCoys"? A fight, right? A feud. There's nothing worse than a feud between people that goes on not for days, not for weeks, not for months, not for years, but for decades. Many of us know at least in part of families that fight like the Hatfields and McCoys. Maybe it's over some disputed land on the farm. Maybe it's politics. Maybe it's over who got married to whom. Nothing worse than that kind of a feud, right? Wrong.

What's worse is when the Hatfields and the Hatfields, when the McCoys and the McCoys fight. What really makes a family feud a family feud is when the family itself is torn apart, is rocked—rocked by sin, deceit, scandal, with no hope of reconciliation.

Maybe, just maybe, you know what I'm talking about firsthand. Husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and brothers, sisters and sisters, you know the hurt and the pain. Maybe you cringe when these kinds of Bible passages come up. "Be merciful; forgive." "I don't want to hear that." Why? "Because I've done my part; now it's their turn to come crawling on their knees to me."

If you have never known this kind of family bitterness, you should today stop and say a prayer of thanksgiving to God. If you have never experienced this, you are in the minority. Brother versus brother, husband versus wife, parent versus child, this is the reality that we live in and, trust me, as a pastor for over fifteen years I could put it all in a book (but I couldn't get it in one volume).

Today, in Genesis 50, we see one of the saddest family feud situations in the whole world. At the same time, we see one of the most beautiful pictures of mercy. Not

mercy in theory, not mercy as a concept, but mercy in action. Mercy is one of those church words. Mercy and grace are two sides of the same coin. Grace is when you get something you don't deserve. Mercy is when you don't get what you do deserve.

Grace: God gives us forgiveness, life, and salvation, earned by Jesus' sacrificial and resurrection. Mercy: He doesn't give us what we do deserve because of our sin, which is hell, eternal separation from the Source of Life.

In fact, all of our readings today focus on that one word, mercy. Jesus said, "Be merciful even as your Father is merciful." Why does Jesus tell us to be merciful? Because it doesn't come naturally. We don't want to be merciful. We want people to get what they deserve. We love it when somebody we don't like or somebody who has been mean to us or somebody we are feuding with has a setback. We're happy, at least on the inside, if not the outside, too. We want people to get it. And then we sit back, smugly, and say, "Thank you, God, for giving them what they deserve."

Our text is the end of the story. If you have never read the Book of Genesis, you may be surprised to discover that nearly 50% of it is about Joseph and his brothers. You know Joseph. Dad's favorite. The technicolored dream coat. The object of sibling jealousy. Thrown into a pit, sold off into slavery. If you think your family squabbles are bad, has any of you been sold off as a slave yet? I didn't think so. And then the most heartless act of all, the brothers go to their father and with a straight face, show him the blood-soaked coat of many colors, and say, "Your son, our brother, is dead."

The pain, the hurt, the heartache. Joseph's a memory. Sold as a slave, unjustly thrown into prison, miraculously restored, interpreter of dreams, Pharaoh's right hand man, vice-Pharaoh in charge of food distribution. Joseph's brothers starving to death.

They had no clue. They go off to Egypt. Joseph recognizes them but they don't recognize him. Oh, he has a little fun with him and plays a game. But at the end, Joseph, who could have crushed them like a little bug and been justified, humanly speaking, in doing so, loved his brothers. He forgave his brothers. He lavished gifts on his brothers. He said, "Go back and get Dad and bring him here."

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the father says, "Bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again!" (Lk 15:22). Can you imagine the celebration? I'm sure there were lots of questions and maybe even some finger-pointing and blaming. But can you imagine the celebration? Joseph was dead to everybody. But now he's alive, and he's going to keep everybody else alive.

Amazing mercy in action. When they brought Jacob and little Benjamin back, Joseph could have wiped out the entire clan except for dad and baby brother. But he didn't do it. Instead, he loved his brothers even though they hadn't deserved it. He forgave his brothers, even though they didn't deserve it. He showered them with mercy.

We lose sight of this, because the story as told jumps ahead, but from the time that Joseph brought Dad and brothers to Egypt until the time that Jacob died, which happened right here at the beginning of Genesis 50, seventeen years have passed. And what happens when Dad dies? You know exactly what happens when Dad dies. The whole family falls apart. Maybe it's not Dad; maybe it's Mom or Grandma or Grandpa. The patriarch, the matriarch, the pillar holding everything up is now gone. And families that were at peace or had an uneasy peace are now right back at it. For seventeen years, Joseph lavished love and mercy and grace upon his brothers. And

seventeen years later all his brothers could think about was: “Dad’s dead, now he’s going to get us.” For seventeen years, their hearts, their consciences, their souls are tormented by guilt. “Oh, sure, God forgives me, but I can’t forgive myself.” “Oh, sure, God forgives me, but I’m not 100% sure that my brother does.” Isn’t that how life works? We come to church and we hear the words of forgiveness full and free, no strings attached, “My son, my daughter, I forgive you all your sins in the name and for the sake of Jesus.” We hear it, we believe it, we eat and drink the body and blood of our Savior. And then we leave the Lord’s house into the reality of our family feuds, our grudges, and in some cases our downright hatreds.

Now we love it when we get mercy, but we are a much harsher taskmaster than God. God forgives us freely even though we deserve to be cast off forever. “Be merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful.” No way, we say. “You don’t know what they did to me, God.” “You don’t know what they put me through, Lord.” “You don’t know the hurt that I’m still carrying around.” Do you realize how silly it is to think that way? Do you realize what a mockery of the Gospel it is when we receive God’s forgiveness but refuse to forgive one another? What right do we have to refuse to show the mercy that God, whose Son our sins sent to the Cross, did not refuse to show us?

Joseph today teaches us what mercy in action looks like. Joseph does not excuse their sin. Joseph doesn’t say, “Your sin didn’t hurt me.” In fact, he acknowledges the fact: “What you did to me was downright evil.” But you know what? God is God and I am not. And God took even the evil that you did to me and turned it out and made it good. Only God can do that.

Sin is a horrible evil. When we sin, we sin against ourselves. We sin against our brothers and sisters. We sin primarily against God. Sin is a horrible evil. We fall all too quickly into sin and then the consequences of sin are often with us for years or decades or a lifetime. There is only one medicine that can cure our sin-sick souls. There is only one medicine that can put our consciences at ease and that can heal broken families and that's the holy, precious, innocent blood of Jesus Christ, shed for you and you and the whole world. Shed for your most hated enemy. Shed for the person you can't stand. Shed for the person you refuse to forgive.

And so the same Lord who died for the sake of His own murderers—"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"—calls us to stop all family feuds. Husbands and wives, love each other, forgive each other. Parents and children, knock it off. Call each other on the phone, speak tenderly to one another. Family feuds and squabbles are real, but today God says, Enough is enough. Forgive. And if your family member or your neighbor or church member, refuses to forgive or refuses to reconcile, don't let that stop you from being kind and generous and merciful. Love, forgive, encourage, pray. Why? Because God loves reconciliation. How do I know? He sent Jesus, His Son, to bleed and die to reconcile the whole world unto Himself, and that means He reconciled you.

Come, the feast is ready. Forgiveness, life, and salvation in Jesus. It's yours. And when you look in the mirror, what you see is mercy in action. Thanks be to God.

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