

“Remembering and Forgiving”

Exodus 17:1-7

Part IV of VIII in the Lenten sermon series, “Forgiveness”

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Preacher

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From the Pulpit

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Exodus 17:1-7

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Let us pray: *Gracious God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you as we pause and consider your word, your word of forgiveness in this time and place. Enter our hearts, open our minds, bless our spirits with your presence, with your wisdom, and with your grace, in your name we pray. Amen.*

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Forgiveness is complicated...

- I am making bread this afternoon and my recipe is forgiving, meaning that I don't have to follow the directions all that precisely.
- If two people bump into each other in the grocery store, they might say “forgive me” to each other (even though it was probably not anyone's fault).
- Then, there are times that I forget something minor and I ask for forgiveness.
- There are other times when I do something really bad, either intentionally or unintentionally, and I have to screw up my courage and ask for forgiveness.
- And so on ... Forgiveness can apply to individual situations, social settings, national and global.

Forgiveness is complicated.

Most of the dictionary definitions focus on personal interactions, “letting go of resentment” or “gave up the claim to requital.” But then, those dictionary definitions throw in debt or loan forgiveness at the very end without much commentary.

Forgiveness is complicated.

The Old Testament passage for this morning — Exodus 17:1-7 — brings some further nuance to forgiveness.

The Hebrews — having just escaped slavery, been released from slavery — journeyed in the Sinai. At Rephidim, they camped, but there was no water.

They were thirsty. We need water to live and thrive. So what did they do:

- Did they dig a well to find water?
- Did they organize search parties to scour the area for water?
- Did they consult with Moses to develop a plan for the situation?

No, they did not do any of that. Instead, they “quarreled with Moses”, that is, they complained.

Now remember, they had just been through a similar situation a couple of weeks ago when they were in the wilderness of Sin. They did not have any bread or anything to eat. And what happened then:

- God provided manna.
- God provided quail.

Already, they have forgotten that God provides.

In fact, the congregation of the Israelites have forgotten quite a few things. And the things that they remembered, they got wrong.

- They have forgotten not only the manna and quail.
- They have forgotten the ten plagues.
- They have forgotten the crossing of the Red Sea.

The thing that they remember in chapter 16, they remember wrongly. They claim that as slaves, they sat by the fleshpots of Egypt and ate bread until they were full.

That is not true. Slavery in Egypt was brutal. It is captured in the historical record. It is captured in the biblical record. The Bible tells us that.

The Hebrews groaned under the slavery of Egypt, and those groans moved God to action (Exodus chapter 2).

When the Hebrews thrived, Pharaoh ordered the midwives to kill all the male children (Exodus 1).

When Moses goes to Pharaoh and asks for a day off to go into the wilderness and worship God, Pharaoh does not just say “no,” he increases their workload and tells them to make bricks without straw.

The Hebrews have forgotten their own story, and they start to quarrel with Moses.

So in this story. Who has the beef? Who deserves forgiveness. Moses does. God does. Right?

But what happens. God “lets go” of the complaints. God forgives the people and provides water.

Forgiveness is complicated.

God knows that the Hebrews were in bondage, in slavery for generations. They are on their way to freedom, to the promised land but they are not there yet. They have internalized their own oppression.

In the middle ages, the Rabbis asked themselves “why did it take so long for our ancestors to cross the Sinai?” You know the Sinai is big but it should not take 40 years to get across. And 40 years is the lifetime of a generation. Those Rabbis answered by observing that “you can take the Hebrews out of slavery, but it will take a generation to get slavery out of the Hebrews.” The Hebrews had internalized the oppression of slavery. In spite of themselves, they believed the stories that Pharaoh told about the world.

- The story of scarcity. There is not enough to go around and only Pharaoh can provide.
- The story of fear. Someone wants to take your stuff and only Pharaoh can protect you.
- The story of despair. That’s the way it is and there is nothing that you can do about it. You need to get along with Pharaoh.

What does this have to do with us though? We’re dressed in our Sunday bests. We are in a beautiful sanctuary. We are not stuck in the wilderness like the Hebrews. We’re free. Aren’t we?

I don’t know. When I think about...

Crushing debt — student loan debt, credit card debt, medical debt — that keeps people working in dead end jobs that they cannot sustain. Debt is just another form of bondage.

Rising anxiety, depression, suicide, despair points to massive levels of social dysfunction. Now, I don't want to be misunderstood. If you are facing anxiety or depression or any kind of serious mental health challenge, get therapy, get treatment. At the same time, we have to confront the social situation that seems to be driving these mental health trends.

If you or someone you love is trying to buy a house or find an apartment, they are going to be paying unsustainable prices for basic housing.

Then, there is climate change, political polarization, rising illiteracy.

Are you sure that we are not in some kind of bondage? Are you sure that we are not in the wilderness.

Like the Israelites, the way out of the wilderness is forward to the promised land which is filled with abundance, hope and promise, not back to Egypt marked by scarcity, fear, despair, and bondage.

Don't buy into the stories told by the Pharaoh's of our times. There is more than enough. There is hope. There is promise. Pharaoh will not save you. Pharaoh only takes care of himself.

So we are called to go forward towards God's story.

Forgiveness is complicated. If you remember who you are and to whom you belong, there is a way forward.

Now, there is not only one way forward. One powerful way forward is by joining with other people of faith to witness the abundance, hope, and promise. You can make that witness on Tuesday, April 25th at the Celeste Center on the State Fairgrounds for the BREAD Nehemiah Action.

- At that meeting, people of faith will challenge the myth that there is nothing that you can do about climate change by challenging the Columbus City Council to take concrete steps to protect the tree canopy.
- At that meeting, people of faith will challenge the myth of fear that drives current policing practices. 2021 was the deadliest year in the history of Columbus, and BREAD got the City to implement proven violence reduction strategies. Murder has gone down a bit, but not enough. We need to keep the pressure on Mayor Ginther and the Police Department so that deep and real change in policing is implemented.
- At that meeting, people of faith will challenge the myth of scarcity and tell the Franklin County Commission to put more money into Affordable Housing. If our City can come up with the hundreds of millions to house a soccer team, then we can find the money to house families.

When we find ways to witness to God's promise, we find a path to true repentance, to deep forgiveness. We find freedom.

Forgiveness is complicated. But one reason that it is complicated is that we are so confused about the story of God's love, we are so confused about God's promise. Let's create a future of freedom where we will each find forgiveness. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rev. Aeschbury is Executive Director of the DART (Direct Action and Research Training) Center, a national network of 31 justice ministries of which the BREAD (Building Responsibility, Equality, and Dignity) organization here in Columbus is a member.