

The Hard Path of Reconciliation

Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Trinity Sunday

Sermon Text: Genesis 50:15-21



¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him."

¹⁶ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died, ¹⁷ 'Say to Joseph, Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not

fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Anger, annoyance, disappointment, and misunderstandings happen among us human beings. That's normal. In the best cases, one can talk about a misunderstanding and sort out the problem. But our experiences teach us that such reconciliation seldom occurs. Instead, we always need someone to blame. When we are hurt, we need a black sheep. Someone on whom we can unload all our anger. But what happens if we can't find a culprit? And what happens when we become guilty, hurt, and disappointed but can never express these feelings? Normally, we store up anger. It's like a pressure cooker. When the pressure gets too high at some point, everything explodes and the damage is very great. Perhaps the worst wars in our world are also a consequence of stored up hate and anger! That's why such feelings are extremely dangerous. They are so dangerous because we so often don't notice them until it's too late. The feeling often begins with just small things: "He or she is already 5 minutes late to the meeting now..." "this person has made such an off-color remark again." And then these looks, if looks could kill, well then.... Often enough, these little trifles collect in interpersonal relationships until all at once a wall stands between people and they avoid each other. Eventually they avoid all contact. They just want nothing significantly more to do with one other. In such situations, we tend to suppress the conflict. Nevertheless, we say in a friendly tone, "Hello," "How are you?" "How's your family?" But inside.... Oh dear! it bubbles and seethes like before a violent storm. And once bitterness has gained a foothold in the heart, it won't be gotten rid of anytime soon. A paralysis spreads. Nothing works anymore, nothing moves anymore, and often enough, it's not known exactly where it all started. But one thing is clear. Bitter people are deeply unhappy people. Such a miserable thing should be thoroughly shaken and stirred so that all the bitterness can come out. Allow me again to explain with an example. This is a cocoa bean! And next to this cocoa bean, I have the very finest, tastiest chocolate. This chocolate originated from such a cocoa bean. However, if you were to taste the cocoa bean, it is absolutely inedible. Because the cocoa bean is extremely bitter. So, before I get a chocolate like this, a

lot of things must still happen. This cocoa bean must first be ground. But it is still very, very bitter and must be stirred for a long time so that this bitterness can come out. So it is with our human relationships. If we simply ignore the relationship. If we simply cover up the bitterness. And especially if we say nice things to one another to mask all the bitterness, we humans become bitter and inedible. And then we should really let one thing go through our head for a long time. And that is that we ourselves are becoming bitter. Not the one who wronged us. We ourselves become inedible and unpleasant for other people. And then we must do exactly what is done with a cocoa bean. We must approach it energetically. We must grind it ... and then we must stir it. And for a very long time. That means having honest conversations. It means admitting guilt ... or at least being open to sharing in the guilt. It also means that we can admit to making mistakes without condemning the other person.... Now all that is easier said than done! A lot of time, tears, and patience is needed. Just like grinding the cocoa bean.

A man who can show us all of this very well is Joseph, who we meet in our Bible reading for today. Joseph, the son of Jacob, was thrown into a well by his brothers. They wanted to actually kill him but then sold him to the Egyptians. He should have worked as a slave for the rest of his life. He should have been considered dead to his brothers and father. The brothers mistreated, accused, and then left Joseph for dead. If ever a person had a reason to be bitter and be done with other people, it was Joseph. But Joseph went a different way. He took a very, very long path. A path that cost a lot of pain. A path that cost a lot of suffering. Joseph went the way of the cocoa bean. He had to come to terms with his brothers. Instead of simply killing his brothers, which would have been entirely possible, Joseph confronted them. And that sometimes hurt him a lot. Once he had to cry so loudly that the whole palace in Egypt heard about it. When something like that happens, it is safe to say that this is where relationships start to move. Here is where the feelings that were hidden deep in the heart suddenly come to the surface. And that hurts! Joseph cries without restraint. But his brothers also didn't have it easy. They had imagined this thing with Joseph to be so simple. They would sell Joseph to Egypt, tell their father that he was eaten by a wild animal, and never hear of the story again. No, that was a complete miscalculation. The sins of the brothers haunted them all their lives—even when everything was over. Even after they were already safe in Egypt. And even after everything was already sorted out and Joseph had forgiven them, fear came up again after their father Jacob was dead. And doubt rose up in the hearts of the brothers. "What if Joseph had only protected them because of their father. Now he could kill them all after the death of their father. And they thought of a small lie to save their own skin. They would say that before his death, Jacob once again had expressed the wish that Joseph should forgive his brothers. When Joseph heard that, he cried again. Perhaps because he recognized the brothers' lie. Perhaps because all of that came up again. Yes, after all these years, the pain was still not gone. But in this situation, Joseph was granted something that none of his brothers could recognize. Joseph could see that, which none of his brothers could recognize. Namely, that God had His hand in it. I call that the finest, noblest spiritual maturity. Such a maturity can only be gotten as a gift from God. When someone amidst unfathomable cruelty and terrible selfishness can still recognize the calm and almost invisible hand of God, then that is a miracle.

"You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" says Joseph.

Joseph can see the hand of God in his whole terrible fate. And as he does that, healing occurs not only between him and his brothers but also between him and God. And there one can really noticeably sense how all the bitterness comes out of human relationships. And isn't that always the way of God? Where

reconciliation happens, God has a hand in it? The laws in our world are different. Bitterness, resentment, hate increase. One outrage calls for an even bigger retaliation. That is not the way of our God. The past is overcome in faith that God can even turn evil to good.

Reconciliation says: I want to be there for you again, to the best of my ability.

Reconciliation talks kindly to others; reconciliation means that we who have become guilty can comfort one another.

Today Jesus calls you to forgive your brother and your sister because He forgave us. You must not develop bitterness inside yourself. Jesus wants to remove it; He wants to let it escape. Because Jesus has forgiven me everything, I am also ready to forgive again. Leave no room for bitterness, it shouldn't bore into your heart. Think about a liquid chocolate: it has refined character. Its flavor is fine and rounded because it is constantly moved back and forth. The existing bitterness dissipates. But that doesn't happen on its own. In the case of the chocolate, the big machine, which it stirs the chocolate, accomplishes this. You, however, must continually allow the Spirit and the Word of God to move you. They lead you to Jesus. And Jesus forgives all bitterness. Your Christian life takes on a refined character. You become free to meet your brother and sister in love and in thoughts of peace.

Paul writes: "Be compassionate and kind. Forgive one another if one has a complaint about the other. You could almost say: "Be delicate and fine-melting in your dealings with one another." Of course, this can't be implemented quite as sweetly as with chocolate, but all the more with the heart. May God make us into Josephs, into Josephs who don't bear a grudge, who recognize God's hand even on messed up paths and grant others love and forgiveness. Amen.