

15th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19a
Genesis 50:15-21
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

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I wish I had a dollar for every time I've heard the word "unprecedented" this week. These are unprecedented times, it's true. The fires raging all around our state -- unprecedented. The Covid-19 virus and worldwide pandemic taking lives in every country – unprecedented. Economic fallout and massive job loss – unprecedented. The limits placed on our daily movements, leaving us isolated, forcing students into distance learning – unprecedented. Today's large scale movement for racial justice and over 100 days of protests here in Portland – unprecedented. Political turmoil, disinformation and polarization – unprecedented. No wonder we are so disoriented, my friends. Let us take a moment to just acknowledge what we are carrying, asking God to renew us in body, mind and spirit. ...

"Unprecedented" means something we've never known or done before. We are facing things that haven't happened to us before, so we don't have ready solutions available. We can't draw from past experience or take a lesson from how we handled this kind of thing the last time around, because there is no precedent.

A "precedent" would be an earlier example or action that could guide us in dealing with similar circumstances later on. Like a legal precedent, a decision made earlier, which informs how you reason through a later case. A precedent is something that went before and teaches us. And we don't have a precedent for all of this.

Or do we? As Christians, we do have a precedent. We can draw strength from the fact that we are part of a family of faith that spans centuries and millenia. In all that time, siblings who love God have faced uncertainty and suffering that are similar to ours, though their specific circumstances may have been different. There is Christian precedent for people walking by faith through confusion and difficulty, and trusting God to help make a way. There is precedent for Christ-followers finding a path forward, step by step and one day at a time, with God's help. There is precedent for leaning deeply into prayer. There is precedent for coming together in a community of love and mutual support. There is precedent for those who have more sharing with those who have less, in time of need.

Christians who face "unprecedented" times know how to take refuge in God who is timeless. And Christians also look to the precedent of Jesus, who the Bible calls "the

pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” That is, Jesus is the one who’s gone ahead of us through this human life, faced the trials and even the worst imaginable, death by torture on a cross. And through it, Jesus acted with love and has now completed the journey to dwell in the full and radiant presence of God. (Heb 12:2) Jesus is our forerunner, the one who goes before.

So yes, we are living in unprecedented times. But let’s not forget that someone has walked this way before. Jesus Christ is our precedent for knowing how to live in grace and compassion and trust, in justice and courage and generosity. We learn to be faithful in all circumstances as we look to Christ. And today one way we can look to Christ is to look to scripture.

Today’s scripture reading focuses us on one of Christ’s central teachings: forgiveness. One of the most brilliant, bedrock truths of Christianity. It’s been said that the reason Jesus focused so much on forgiveness is that he knew how often people get hurt, and how much we need forgiveness to survive. If we could never forgive, we would be literally trapped by our negative experiences, buried under the weight of all the evil things that take place. Imagine a marriage where the partners never forgave each other – just held onto every sharp word and disagreement. Imagine how the hurts would multiply and eventually destroy everything. We’ve known people who pile up grudges and nurture resentments and end up paralyzed by bitterness. That is no way to live.

Forgiveness means letting resentment and bitterness go, and giving up your right to get even. Forgiveness doesn’t mean excusing the person who hurt you – but it does mean letting go. Refusing to let that wrong action be perpetuated or multiplied through you. By forgiving, you put a stop to the cycle of bitterness. You refuse to let your future be shaped by the evil you have experienced.

But forgiveness is more than a healthy way to live. Jesus calls us to forgive, not just because it’s good for us, but good for the world. Through forgiveness God wants to give a gift that continues to grow and continues to create new life until finally it makes the whole world new.

Peter came to Jesus one day and asked, “How many times should I forgive someone who’s done me wrong? Seven times?” Peter thought that was a lot – but Jesus replied: “Try 77 times” (in some translations, it says seventy times seven—490 times!) Which was like Jesus saying, “What I really want you to do is forgive a gazillion times, Peter. This forgiveness thing is bigger than any of us!”

Peter’s eyes must have bugged out, because Jesus went on to tell an exaggerated story about a slave who owed the king an astronomical sum of money – I’m told in today’s

dollars it would be over 2 billion dollars. That slave got the surprise of his life when the king cancelled his 2 billion dollar debt, just because he asked. It's outlandish, and it's meant to show that this forgiveness thing truly is bigger than any of us. The king represents God, and out of pity – that is, out of God's mercy and kindness and healing love – out of God's outlandish goodness – God forgives us and sets us all free in Christ. Surely a gift like this will change everything about how we live!

Well, not necessarily. In the story the slave walked out free and clear, but what did he do? He ran into a guy who owed him a small amount, perhaps 6,000 dollars - and started shaking him down, demanding that money right now. Then threw him into debtors prison when he couldn't pay.

Really? We are as shocked by this man's unforgiveness as we were by the king's amazing forgiveness. How could that slave not be changed, how could he not have his life totally rearranged by the outlandish kindness he had received?

And that of course is the point of the story. Because people who have been forgiven so generously, and blessed so astonishingly, are meant to be people who will always be ready to pass on that forgiveness-- not just 7 or 77 or even 490 times-- but repeatedly, continuously, infinitely, out of sheer thankfulness and joy. They are meant to give themselves over to this love that is bigger than all of us.

We're not meant to take it literally that God will punish those who don't forgive (that's all of us at times!), but we are meant to take caution. Because we can see the truth of this thing, in people's lives. When people refuse to forgive, when people hoard grudges and nurture resentments and feed that anger, they do block themselves off from others -- and even from God's love. They refuse to enter into the new future God is creating for the world, where love is the rule, and love gives life.

The best way I can express this is through a true story. I know a woman who grew up in a home that was abusive in every way. Her parents were simply unable to show love to their children; instead, they wounded them terribly.

This woman grew up hating herself, feeling ashamed and unlovable. Today she has a harsh edge to her personality and her behavior often pushes people away. She struggles with her painful history the way other people struggle with a chronic illness. And her question is not just, *How can I forgive the people who hurt me?* but even more, *How can I ever love myself? or accept love from others, even from God?*

She went to some judgmental churches that damaged her even more, but then in a Lutheran church she heard the good news that God accepted her, no matter what. In

this church God's forgiveness was at the heart of the teaching, and most importantly, God's goodness and love were lived out by the people there.

One was a teacher, who gave her the simple gift of his unconditional friendship. He had a talent for truly listening, and also a knack for saying what needed to be said. But most of all, this teacher was there for her when she was hurt and confused, even when she resisted his kindness. He was ready to talk any time, and when she moved away he was there through long-distance phone calls. Over the years, he was her anchor through many storms, and his patient caring and persistence helped her come to see herself as someone God claims with forgiveness and accepts with love. When this friend died a little while back, she cried for days -- but the overwhelming feeling she had was joy for having known him. Because she saw his friendship as a gift straight from God. She never felt she deserved that friendship. She says, "I never believed I was worth that kind of attention. But he kept on showing me I was."

Such a small example, and yet it's not small. Because this kind of persistent love and kindness is what redeems people's lives. Never underestimate its power. It's a miracle that happens every day, when people who have received God's immeasurable love allow it to flow through them into all the places of pain and hurt and need and loss that fill this world.

And our kindness to each other is just the smallest reflection of the immense love God has for us. For even when we think we don't deserve it, God reaches out to forgive us. Even when we try so hard to be perfect, despairing as we screw up again and again -- God's pervasive love covers it all. And even when we doubt God's love, or resist it, or believe it couldn't possibly be for us -- God keeps on surrounding us with everlasting, imagination-blowing kindness.

Because this is who God is, and this who we are. We are first of all people loved by God. This is the precedent God sets. First of all, God reaches out in love to us. In grace and forgiveness and unconditional love. God's forgiving love is our precedent. Everything else flows from this.

And even when we cling to our grudges, and nurture our bitterness, and put up angry defenses, still God's love keeps knocking against the hardness of our hearts, begging to be let in. God keeps on forgiving our 2 billion dollar debt, just because we need it forgiven. And God keeps on inviting us to let God's astonishing goodness, God's unbelievable mercy, God's never-ending kindness, God's life-transforming love flow out through us to everyone else who needs it just as much.

Thanks be to God. Amen.