

**Sermon - Proper 19, Year A**  
**Baptism of Kenny and Eden**  
**9/17/23**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the most profound and surprising experiences over the span of a human life is the experience of relief. It is a strange thing that the most powerful sort of joy accompanies not the celebration of something good but rather the avoidance of something bad. You're in school, and you thought you had a test tomorrow for which you haven't not studied, but then, ah! A snow day! Sweet relief! You are older, then, and find yourself musing that it's been a long time since your spouse or your child has received your text message and they have not sent a reply. The hours grow longer, you're trying not to imagine the worst, and then there it is – mercifully – all is well. They'd simply misplaced the phone. Or there you are in the doctor's office. Something is wrong. It could be something small, or it could be something large. You're waiting – helpless, suddenly, to do anything but pray – and then you hear: benign. Treatable. Today you're going to be okay.

Relief. Relief is strange and complicated enough when it comes from circumstances that seem beyond our control, but it is stranger still when it comes to the question of forgiveness. What does it mean to recognize that we have made an error — perhaps even something grave and terrible – an error for which we seem to deserve our shame...and then we muster the courage to ask the one we have offended to forgive. What sweet relief when that relationship is restored. It can be even more difficult to offer our forgiveness to those who may not deserve it. It may be the work of a lifetime. But this, too, restores us. Even removing a thorn from a wound begins the body's work of returning to health.

Forgiveness is the unifying theme within our scripture passages this morning, offering us a vision of what forgiveness means, not only for us human beings stumbling through this work of forgiving one another, but also a vision of what forgiveness means to God. In our reading from Genesis, we are invited into a small but absorbing scene in the life of Joseph of technicolor dreamcoat fame and his brothers. At this point in the story, Joseph's brothers have thoroughly betrayed him, selling him into slavery in Egypt. Years later, they find themselves starving in the midst of a family in their country, with no choice but to travel to Egypt and beg the mercy of the royal household. They do not realize until they arrive that this household is managed by the one they had sent away. The brothers know that they do not deserve the mercy of Joseph, and yet with a final plea, in memory of their father, they fall down before him and weep. "We are here as your slaves," they say. And Joseph, overcome with compassion, forgives them. "In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them." Sweetest, most remarkable relief.

In the Gospel from St. Matthew, we continue where we left off last week, with Jesus instructing the disciples on the pattern of life fitting for the kingdom of God. At the beginning of this chapter – chapter 18 – the disciples ask Jesus, "who will be greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" and the rest of Jesus' teaching reveals explicitly how everything they have expected about power and deservedness and greatness and strength – all of this will be turned upon its head in the kingdom of God. Jesus pulls a little child toward him and says, "unless you become as one such as this, you will not enter my kingdom." He offers the parable of the lost sheep, assuring that not even a little one who wanders away will be forgotten. He insists on the dignity of every member of the community – even the most notorious of sinners can be brought back into the fold. And today we find another question from Peter: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Seven times! This is wildly generous, surely. How many of us, truly – when we think about it – make a habit of offering explicit forgiveness as many as seven entire times when we’ve been wronged. Jesus’ answer was shocking to the disciples, and it is shocking to us. “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” The parable that follows gives dimension to this unimaginable charity. When Jesus reveals that the slave in debt to his lord owes ten thousand talents, this is like saying he owes over ten million dollars. This debt affects not only his own fortune, but the lives of his family – his wife and his children – too. This is an impossible burden. This will condemn his lineage for generations. And then the lord, out of pity, has mercy on him. Relief, wild and pure.

Of course it is easier for us to receive mercy than to give it. When the forgiven slave refuses to cancel the smaller debt owed to him, Jesus is clear that this is unacceptable. As you have been forgiven, so you must forgive with your whole heart. Even when it is hard. Even when it does not make sense. For this is the forgiveness that you yourself have received in Christ.

The sweet, pure relief of this forgiveness is our inheritance in baptism, every single day. We recall it especially today as we celebrate the baptisms of Eden and Kenny, and as we renew our baptismal vows together in this place. For over two thousand years, it has been the blessing of the church to follow Jesus’ own commandment: “go therefore, and baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” To walk one another down into the river or to the edge of the font, where in the water we die to sin and death and isolation and rise again to new, eternal life in the heart of God.

It is easy for us to think of baptism as a special day with charming babies, where we have a nice cake and walk out into the world with a sweet picture or two. But it is our work together to remind one another that baptism is not merely an event, but a condition of being. To be baptized

is to be forgiven: always, even especially when forgiveness is not deserved. Baptism is freedom. Baptism is sweetest, most generous relief. It is God's insistence that we are never defined by our worst days or our best, but by a grace that is unstoppable and pure.

To be baptized is to enter that household of God where, as the psalmist sings, "as the heavens are high above the earth, \*so is his mercy great upon those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, \* so far has he removed our sins from us." As the heavens are high above the earth, so is his mercy great. Sweet, perfect relief, forever.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.