

September 17, 2017

Genesis 50:15-21: **“Love Is Longsuffering, Is Kind”**

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Avenue
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

A poet by the name of Hazel Felleman wrote:

I wish there were some wonderful place
Called the Land of Beginning Again
Where all our mistakes, and all our heartaches
And all our selfish griefs
Could be cast like a shabby old coat at the door
And never be put on again

It seems to me that all of us have the same wish - a place where we can put away our past - all the mistakes, all our heartaches, and all of our selfish griefs. You know your life, I know mine, we think to ourselves, "I wish that my life had not been that way. I wish I had never done this or that. I want to change it," as if things would have turned out better the second time around.

Do you think that Joseph's brothers would have jumped at the opportunity to go back in time to that moment when they sold their brother into slavery, ripped up his special coat, painted it with animal blood, and took it to their father while pretending that he was dead? Many years had now passed and Joseph had worked hard in their lives to restore them. He had forgiven them, and our Old Testament lesson records, "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.'" Again, Joseph had already forgiven them! However, they were still "haunted" and terrified by what they had done. They had a hard time really believing that Joseph could forgive them for doing such a thing. They had a hard time understanding and letting go of the past.

So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: 'Say to Joseph, 'Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.'" I don't agree with most of his theology, but Adam Clarke once observed: "the conscience records our sins and by giving birth to continual fears and doubtfulness destroys all peace of mind, security, and confidence."

We cannot go back and change things. And while there is a wonderful place "Called the Land of Beginning Again," we are not in the new heaven and earth yet. Besides, consider the fact that if Joseph's brothers could have gone back to change things, then Joseph would not have landed in Egypt to become powerful enough to save his people from the famine! And that is what Joseph means when he says, "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. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." And Moses adds by the Holy Spirit, "Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them."

Love Is Longsuffering, Is Kind! even to those people that we might think are beneath our consideration, worthy of punishment, worthless, or deserving of scorn, mockery, sneering, and laughter. **Love Is Longsuffering, Is Kind!** are the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:4a. Do you know what

“longsuffering” love is? It refers to a forbearing, persevering, patient love toward a person. It is a form of self-sacrificial love we extend to someone else. When God revealed his glory to Moses on the mountain of Sinai, he proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6).” We are talking about God’s incredibly patient love toward sinners. Love is not permissive; it does not tolerate sins, abuse, or injustice in the sense of enabling those things; for all of these must be confronted. But, they are confronted in a spirit of love and kindness. Love is kind. What does it mean when we say that love is kind? It means this: not only does love desire the welfare of another, but works for it. Such love is found first in God.

God loves us so much that he left sins beforehand go unpunished that he might send his one and only Son to be the revelation of his heart. The Word become flesh, and Jesus of Nazareth lived a perfect life on our behalf. He erases all of our imperfections with his perfection. As it says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, [God] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” Not only that, but he was handed over to suffer our death and hell so that we might live and be in heaven. We read in Romans 4:25, [He] was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” God forgives sins because He is merciful and because of Christ’s atoning sacrifice for sinners. In Christ, Paul writes in Ephesians 1:7, “we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of [God’s] grace.”

When the Holy Spirit takes the forgiveness that has been earned by Jesus Christ and gives it to us, it changes everything. We are set free from all of our sins no matter how big or horrible they may be. What a wonderful truth and amazing gift that is! Being set free from our sins means that we no longer desire to somehow change the past, because we know that our God has used that past to bring us to Him. God has worked hard despite our crooked paths. In the details, all of our paths have been different, but in the mysterious movements of God, in both his longsuffering and kindness, we have been finally brought to Him! Therefore, like Paul, we can say: “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (3:13b-14).”

What was it that Joseph said to his brothers? “God meant it for good.” Astounding! Whatever he allows, and wherever he intervenes, it is what it is, and great good has come, not in the sense that we willfully do evil so that good can result, but rather God in his longsuffering and kindness has used the mistakes, heartaches, and all of our selfish griefs to even save us. Our problem is that we are often like Joseph’s brothers who frequently forget the forgiveness that has so been freely given to set us free. We get stuck in what has been, instead of holding on to what is. In our Old Testament lesson, Joseph is very much like God. Look at how long suffering and kind he is to these brothers who are a mess. Look at how he keeps setting forward his love for them in order to restore them. There isn’t any reason to go backward in time, or try to somehow change it. We are to be at ease in forgiveness and salvation. Joseph shows us the longsuffering and kindness of God to teach us, as the apostle Peter says: “count the patience of the Lord as salvation.”

When we understand that the plan of God has all along been the salvation of our souls, we are able to let go of all that “stuff” that we have hard time letting go of. Joseph overlooked a lot, and in the

restoration of his brothers he made every effort. Even when his brothers kept sliding into the past, Joseph held in front of them a constant longsuffering and kindness. I am reminded of a story about Luther. To a man who was overwhelmed by the mysterious movement of God in his life, Luther once said, "Take this!" as he handed the man a crucifix. "Here is your comfort and cheer." When we are holding on to the love of God in Christ Jesus, the "why did it have to be that way," or the "I wish it would have been different," fades away into a simply thankfulness that "God meant it for good." Even more, we gladly say: "if this is the path I had to take in order to be saved, then so be it." And so, we embrace it all, and as Paul writes I say to you, "let us hold true to what we have attained (Philippians 3:16)."

Now, if God has done such marvelous things for us, then we should also do the same for one another, affording to one another the same longsuffering and kindness that God has shown us, that we might be an instrument of salvation for others as we ourselves have been saved. We are to love each other deeply for love covers over a multitude of sins. That doesn't mean that sin isn't confronted, but it does mean that sin is confronted with always the goal of salvation. As it says in Ephesians 4:32, "be kind and compassionate to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Moreover, we should certainly add the words of Jesus: "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:44-45)."

And why should we do such things? After all, are they not beneath our consideration, worthy of punishment, worthless, or deserving of scorn, mockery, sneering, and laughter? **Love Is Longsuffering, Is Kind.** How can we possibly be so cold hearted to anyone when we realize how God has put up with us and so patiently worked in our lives, touching our wicked paths in this and that way, in order to finally bring us to salvation and keep us there? To the eye who does not know Christ, Joseph should have given his wretched brothers all that they deserved. But Joseph was grateful that God had not done that to him. Rather, God had worked with him in a very difficult life in order to save him. Joseph would not do something different to his wretched brothers. Likewise, what else is there for us to do other than to be longsuffering and kind to all, as God has been longsuffering and kind to us?

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott