September 12/13, 2026
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Matthew's Lutheran Church
Genesis 50:15-21
"You Are Forgiven!"

One iron bar after another was welded in place. Those building the iron cage didn't realize it at the time, but they were becoming prisoners in their own creation. The construction began with the sin of jealousy. To the sin of jealousy was added hatred. To the sin of hatred was added selling their brother into slavery. To that sin was added deceit. To deceit was added years of knowing they had done the wrong thing. Three iron barred sides were built along with the door. The only thing left for their own entrapment was locking the door with them inside.

Perhaps the strongest and most torturous prison is one's guilt. There's a difference between being guilty and obsessing with guilt. Being guilty is building those iron bars around us. Sin after sin traps us in and separates us from God. That's what Joseph's brothers had done in the past.

The brothers saw an opportunity to act on their jealousy and hatred of Joseph. He had become the favorite son and had dreams which spoke to his leadership over them some day. So, they threw Joseph into a cistern. Instead of killing him, they decided to sell him to slave traders passing by. With Joseph out of the picture, they simply needed to deceive their father and all would be in the past. They told Jacob that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. The iron cage of guilt had been built. And, the brothers remained inside for years as they considered what they had done.

Being guilty before God is simply committing the crimes of breaking his commands. We are trapped by our own sins which separate us from God. This is the consequential reality of sin. Obsessing with guilt, though, is what can keep us trapped inside even though there's a way out.

The Bible assures us the way out is forgiveness. Jesus' perfect life, his innocent death, and his resurrection from the dead have promised us we don't have to stay locked in our cage of guilt. We can walk right on out as Jesus unlocks the door for us. So, why would we remain? Is it because you don't *feel* forgiven? Do you still feel the weight of sin because it feels like you're still being punished for what you've done? Or, you're wondering, "How can I be forgiven if I keep committing the same sin?"

That's what it was initially for Joseph's brothers. 17 years prior to our lesson, there was a famine in the whole land. By God's grace, Joseph had risen to 2nd in command in Egypt. Everyone had to come to Egypt for food. Joseph recognized his brothers when they came for food, but they didn't recognize him. The brothers didn't realize it, but Joseph gave them several tests to see if they had repented and changed their ways. It was obvious they had as they were concerned for one another's safety. It was obvious they were distraught as to what they had done to Joseph many years prior. But, the brothers received the tests in a different way.

Joseph forced one of the brothers to remain in prison until they brought back their youngest brother on a future trip. Joseph also put the silver with which they had bought the grain back in the sacks to see if they'd be honest in the future. Again, the brothers didn't know it was Joseph doing these things. To them, these unfortunate circumstances were the hand of God. They said, **"Surely we are being punished because of our brother."** And, **"What is this that God has done to us."**

The brothers were obsessing with their guilt. They were factually guilty in the past, but they had not walked out of their own prison of guilt. Rather than trusting in God's forgiveness, they were seeing outward circumstances as possible evidence for their continued guilty verdict. That's what obsessing with guilt does. It's a heavy burden which causes restlessness.

Joseph would verbally forgive his brothers when they returned to get more grain. All was well and forgiven! Or so it seemed. Based on our lesson today, there was underlying guilt and worry remaining in the brothers' hearts. They still seemed trapped in their prisons of guilt. The brothers imagined that Joseph was only putting on a show for the sake of their father Jacob. Now that Jacob was dead, Joseph would enact revenge. **"What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?"**

Obsessing with guilt leaves a cloud hanging over our heads. All because of outward negative circumstances. And, because forgiveness can sound too good to be true at times, or too easy a thing to receive. Even Joseph's brothers thought they had to earn his forgiveness. **"'We are your slaves,' they said."**

Dealing with such guilt can be crippling. So, how can you and I leave behind such guilt and get rid of it when such feelings are so binding? Does the phrase "forgive yourself" apply? It doesn't because "forgive yourself" is never found in the Bible. It's a worldly phrase that offers zero comfort.

The meaning behind the very word "forgive" is to 'lift' or 'carry away'. Our guilt is too heavy for us to lift off of ourselves. Trying to lift just one sin off yourself would be like trying to lift one of these heavy stones that support our altar off your body by yourself. And, that's just one sin!

So, if we can't forgive ourselves, who can? God can, and he does. He is the one who opens the door to your guilty prison and leads you out by hand to make sure you leave it behind since he already has in his heart. He does so with his powerful Word. Outward circumstances and our own feelings easily deceive us. But, God's Word is truth without a hint of deception.

When guilt holds on to you and you hold on to it, listen to the powerful Gospel, especially those verses which deal so specifically with sin being forgotten by God. Psalm 103:12 states, **"As far as the East is from the West, so far as he removed our transgressions from us."** Micah 7:19 comforts with these words, **"You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea."** The LORD himself says in Jeremiah 31:34, **"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."**

If this is God's promise, if he has forgiven, your guilt is gone. You and I can't forgive ourselves. But, by faith, we can trust in God's promise to forgive us. We can move on because he has moved on. By his power, we can leave guilt behind because he has forgotten our sins, even as impossible as that sounds. But, with God, nothing is impossible.

Perhaps that's why we also so easily hold on to our own guilt. We know how hard it is for us to forgive and forget. God isn't like us, is he? He is perfectly, most unconditionally loving. If he says he has forgotten our sins, he has. While we may never forgot our own sins and what we've done, we can leave behind the guilt they once caused. God has forgiven you. Believe it and be free from the prison of guilt you once built for yourself. You built it, but God's grace and mercy destroyed it for your good.

If you're still struggling to believe it, speak with another Christian about it. Last week, we focused on the role of Christians to point out sin for the sake of leading someone to repent. Today, it's the wonderful privilege of a Christian to tell another, "You are forgiven." When we're still struggling with guilt, sometimes we just need to hear from another person the very words God has already said. That's why the Bible encourages us at times to confess our sins to one another, even if we haven't committed a sin against that person. It's for our benefit to hear again that we're forgiven so we can leave guilt behind.

This wonderful truth we've been focusing on is the foundation and springboard we need in order to forgive others when they've sinned against us. Humanly speaking, Joseph had every right to enact revenge on his brothers. He lost several years of his life because he was enslaved and imprisoned unjustly. He lost his

reputation for a time. Meanwhile, his brothers continued to have their freedom and their names free from accusation.

But, forgiveness is not based on human standards. Joseph's statement is such a succinct summary of Jesus' parable in our gospel. **"Am I in the place of God?"** God promises to forgive anyone who has repented. So, let's say someone has sinned against you, and they have repented of their sin. Does God forgive that person? He does! So, when we don't in our hearts, we're trying to play God with a different rule book.

When we don't forgive those who have repented after sinning against us, we're not just harming them. We're harming ourselves and our faith. We harm them because we might keep them locked in their prison of guilt. God has forgiven them, but maybe now they are doubting that because you and I won't forgive. You and I, then, could be guilty of killing a person's soul! And, we harm our own faith because if we don't forgive, how much is God's love really in us? Consider the end of Jesus' parable again. **"In anger, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured…This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from the heart."**

If we rely on our human judgment, it's going to be very difficult to forgive. But, if we remember how God has forgiven us again and again, who are we to play God and refuse forgiveness for that one sin, no matter how grievous, when a person has repented? Or, to put it the way the Apostle Paul did, **"Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."**

We forgive because God already has. He hasn't just forgiven our sins but also the sins of others against us. God's forgiveness in your life is the foundation and strength you need to forgive your spouse for the harsh words or selfishness; to forgive your parents for a failed promise or impatience; to forgive your children for blatant disrespect; to forgive a fellow Christian for talking badly about you behind your back.

This forgiveness isn't just a phrase. It's purposeful with ongoing words and actions. **"Joseph reassured them and spoke kindly to them."** This forgiveness isn't also a one-time thing. Don't be surprised when emotions of hurt and anger resurface connected with a sin you once forgave. We're all human. We might make the same mistake or sin again, and that same mistake or sin might be done against us. "How could they do it again? Can I forgive them again?" Peter asked, **"How many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?"** That's when Jesus taught the parable about showing the same mercy God has shown us. We forgive again and again because God already has again and again.

In a few minutes, we'll pray the Lord's Prayer again. Give special attention to that one petition which is the focal point of today. **"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."** In this petition, we seek God's forgiveness, and he grants it! He also grants the love and strength needed to forgive others. "You are forgiven!" Believe it as God speaks those words to you. Speak those words to others so their own weight of guilt can be lifted by God's proclamation through you. Amen.