

Preserve us, O Lord, from the hypocritical notion that we can become much better than others, and thus reach a position where we may claim Your blessings and mercies as merits. Keep us ever mindful of Christ's death, not for the righteous, but for sinners (like ourselves). Amen. (Luther for the Busy Man, ed. P.D. Pahl, p. 98, adapted)

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." 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.' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? 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." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

In Christ Jesus, whose work alone bore the eternal heat of the day for us, dear fellow redeemed:

"You owe me, big time!" Have you ever said that in jest to someone for whom you performed a favor? Sadly, we probably have thought it, but not in jest, harboring it in our hearts for years, even decades. We then carried it through in our attitude over against the person we think owes us without ever verbalizing it.

Joseph, humanly speaking, had every right to wish pay back upon his brother's evil against him. They sold him into slavery and on account of that ended up in prison and as a consequence was separated from his family for years. Rather, we see the God of grace working upon him, so that he did not seek revenge, but instead took the opportunity to show kindhearted forgiveness. This is what you and I owe each other and all our fellow sinners. Tempted though we are to take up the Self-righteous arrogant position in this life **As Sinners, Our Only Rightful Position Is One of Graciousness.**

I

Review your lists these days of those who you think owe you. Who are on it? - your spouse, children, parents, siblings, boss, coworkers, teacher, classmates, your next door neighbors? Sadly, if we are truly honest with ourselves the list is likely very long. Who is on God's list of those who owe Him? Better yet, who is **not** on it?

You? If I know you as I think I do, you would be among the first to admit that you are on His list of those who are indebted to Him. But knowing you as I know myself, we also so easily conduct ourselves toward our fellow sinners as those who keep lists of fellow sinners indebted to us.

If we were to consider Joseph's early years with his brothers, we might suspect as they did, that he considered himself superior when it came to righteousness, especially in the eyes of his father, Jacob. His father definitely favored him, but we do not have any insight on Joseph's inner attitude over against his brothers. Some of his behaviors could be interpreted as self-righteously arrogant. But Joseph may have been completely guileless in this regard. Putting the best construction on the accounts we have of Joseph's interactions with his brothers would lead us in that direction.

Now when Joseph had his first contacts with them in Egypt when they did not know who he was, he did put them through some rigorous testing to make sure they had had a change of heart. It was demonstrated on how protective they were of Benjamin, the other son born from Rachel whom Jacob favored. They were not only protective of Benjamin but of their father as well, which was unlike how they treated Joseph and Jacob many years earlier when they sold their brother into slavery and told their father he had been torn apart and killed by a wild animal.

Jacob knew as he approached his death, by all rights in a human court Joseph could exact retribution toward his brothers once their father died. They reported the words of Jacob 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."

Did you notice, Jacob was not just appealing to forgive them for the sake of their shared father, but their shared God? Jacob trusted in the God of mercy and grace, in whom he knew that his son, Joseph, also trusted. The appeal for forgiveness was the same as we hear from St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

II

Joseph's response was spoken in tenderhearted kindness: "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? 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." He did not respond from a position of self-righteous arrogance, but a position of graciousness,

which he had learned well during his years with his family and even in his separation.

In Jesus' parable of Laborers in the Vineyard we heard once again the superior attitude exhibited by those who were hired first thinking they deserved more than those last hired. The master challenged such an attitude by saying: "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to the last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?"

Remember it was Judah, the brother of Joseph who suggested they sell him into slavery. He did this not to spare Joseph from murder, which was the original plan, but that they might benefit financially in their disposal of this despised brother. However, it would be Judah who would then receive the high honor of being an ancestor of the coming Christ, not Joseph. Our gracious Lord worked in the heart of Joseph a heart that rejected any deserving, but trusted in God's grace alone. God's undeserved love for all sinners in Christ is the underpinning of saving faith in all of us, my fellow believers.

Jesus did not sacrifice His perfect life for you and all sinners because you or anyone else deserved it, but purely from a heart that loved you from eternity before the world was even created. Those lists we spoke about earlier, which have those who you think owe you in this life for sins of grievous offenses or for sins of ungrateful neglect, seek to destroy them. Approach those on those lists with tenderhearted kindness as did Joseph his brothers. Although remember it is not a work you accomplish on your own by your own willing of it, but by the grace of God at work in your lives.

You come here to the house of God to hear Him speak the words of unconditional absolution, to receive most intimately the very holy body given and holy blood shed for the forgiveness of all your sins. With a sigh of relief receive these things again today. Joseph's brothers no doubt breathed such a sigh of relief when they heard him declare his sincere and abiding love for them. They knew what they deserved. Remember this is how they approached him the day of our text saying among themselves: "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." But by God's grace working in Joseph's heart they saw the face of God and heard the voice of God in their brother.

Glorify the same God who has been gracious to you. Show your spouse, children, parents, siblings, boss, coworkers, teacher, classmates, your next-door neighbors and any others, who you might

think owe you, the face of God. Let them hear the tender loving voice of God kindly speaking those gracious words of forgiveness. The power of God's grace alone redounds to His glory and the welfare to all those around you. Let them go in peace too, just as you do when you depart this place where you gather around your Lord's Word and Sacrament hearing that all your sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake. You are on God's list, known as the Book of Life! Amen.