

Sermon: 2019/02/24 (7th Sunday after Epiphany, Year C), Genesis 45:3-11,15; Psalm 37:1-12,41-42; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50; and, Luke 6:27-38_BTR

[Invite children to the front.]

Do you ever wonder what happens when you die?

In books and cartoons and in our imagination we often think of it in terms of suddenly falling "asleep," and our soul escaping up, up *up* into the sky. [Remove a ghost prop from inside of cassock with a sudden flourish.]

Outside of the body, we often call the soul a "ghost," right?

And we imagine them floating around in Heaven among clouds; and able to drift silently through walls and doors.

And they look like scary bed-sheets with eyeholes.

But this is *not* what the Bible describes.

Yes, it says that we are more than just our physical bodies - *we must be* to be capable of genuinely moral choices and "spirituality."

But the soul isn't very important - not when it is separate from the body.

For it tells us that we are *both* "bits" - and neither this nor that are me by themselves.

I am these things *in relationship*.

Which is why the Bible usually says that when we are dead we are "asleep" - a very, very, very deep sleep.

And we won't wake up until Jesus returns and puts the soul back into our bodies where they belong

- but our bodies made even better!

"Imperishable," says Saint Paul.

(That means, like superman's! Never hungry or sick or old.)

Doesn't that sound wonderful!

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

How are you at forgiveness?

Does it come easy to you?

Or is it a struggle?

To say: "That's okay, I understand: let's move on."

Right now there seems so little forgiveness in our nation:

This week a program on N. P. R. discussed how parolees are "haunted" by joblessness for the rest of their working-lives even for minor misdemeanors, [n.1] caught in a chronic unemployable "purgatory;" and, compounding the issue, across the country 'in-prison college programs are disappearing at an alarming rate.' [n.2]

A willingness to forgive is certainly scarce on T. V. and in the "Twittersphere." - God help you if you get caught up in the "(Media) Limelight."

It seems like an already ancient story now, but whether you believed Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh or his accuser, Christine Blasey Ford - both of whom seemed very convincing "in the moment" - vanishingly few commentators even bothered to ask the question - *if only in principle*:

"Should sins committed in one's youth count against someone *forever*?"

And discount them for public service even years or decades later?

And then, just a fortnight ago, that Liam Neeson fiasco!

In an interview with the British newspaper, *The Independent*, the veteran-actor confessed to having murderous feelings toward ethnic minority men many decades ago following the rape of a close friend, and that he went onto the streets of Northern Ireland - then in the throes of a violent insurgency against the U. K. - and looked to attack any foreigners with a home-made cosh.

When the comments went "viral," the [Hollywood] Studio cancelled the premiere of his latest action-movie because of the outrage online. [n.3]

It doesn't matter that Neeson himself said it was a 'horrible' period in his life; and, 'awful'. That he clearly had expressed remorse and shame. [n.4]

It doesn't matter that so many of us have paid him millions of dollars to watch him at the Cinema wreak vigilante vengeance against Albanians, Turks, Russians and others; [See: the 'Taken' movies.]

movies that some critics see as being not-so-subtly tinged by 'xenophobia'. [n.5]

Oh no, we cry for him to be humiliated in some way, penalised, punished. [n.6]

Rather than applauding him for this rare "slice" of public honesty - for offering a precedent of confession about hidden prejudices and past wrongdoing.

And now some "hoo-ha" about John Wayne?

Saying dumb things.

Who hasn't?!

For 'all have fallen short of the glory of a God.' [Rom. 3:23]

Yet, as a society, we seem to relish - *to hunger* - for the skeletons to emerge from the proverbial closets of celebrities and our politicians; eager to see them fall from grace; to topple from the pedestals that we stuck them on!

But as Christians, we should be different, no?

After all, being forgiving, being ready to let bygones be bygones is supposed to be our Number One thing, right?

Isn't forgiveness supposed to be our signature ethic?

Our defining and peculiar habit?

Consider, if you will, our Old Testament reading this morning:

you know this stuff - Joseph, a very pious but obtuse young man annoys the hell out of his *eleven(!)* brothers, gets beat up by them;

thrown down a well;

sold into slavery;

rejects the seductive advances of his owner's lecherous wife, ends up in an Egyptian prison, and interprets the Pharaoh's cyptic dream about seven fat cows being cannibalised by seven emaciated ones;

is made some sort of economic adviser to the Crown, and becomes very wealthy and important.

Then, finally, his family show up begging for food, and despite the fact that what did to him was, let's face it, *truly* heinous - *shocking!* - we find that rather than gloating or feeling smug or being vindictive, Joseph 'kissed all his brothers and wept upon them'.[\[Gen. 45:15\]](#)

Let me tell you, I don't know if I could have done that!

What Joseph's brothers did wasn't just a misguided prank - a prank gone too far.

His being dumped down the well might've been "in the heat of the moment,"

but what followed was callous *and premeditated*:

Slavery was almost as good as killing him; maybe worse:

they deliberately inflicted a "living hell" on a young boy.

And we miss that, maybe, because of our familiarity with the story;

because we know it ends well - "...happily ever after."

(Although, of course, not quite. [\[See: the beginning of \(the Book of\) Exodus!\]](#))

Their treatment (of him) was *grotesque*.

A crime.

And Joseph says nothing about it.

He doesn't even leave *any* space at all for them to actually say, "Sorry."

- rather, he reveals his identity - which was obfuscated by the traditional, thick makeup that Egyptian men wore, especially the uppercases of which he was now a member:

There was lots of eyeliner - green and black; wigs, 'pleated or curled and set by means of...beeswax.'[\[n.7\]](#)

And he simply "whips" this off, telling them to go fetch their father.

I'd have been furious!

Speechless with rage.

And certainly still resentful; *bitter*.

But not him:

He seeks nor expects any kind of apology from his abusers. [Pause.]

Now, you know, not long after I arrived here (at St. Matthew's), I had a very interesting conversation with my colleague over at First United Methodist, Tommy Vann, who listened very politely as I told him about how hospitable everybody was, and neighbourly, both in and outside of the Church; and he explained that that was to be expected "from the people of Appalachia."

That's right!

That's what he said.

But, he warned me, pastor-to-pastor, I needed to watch out for the negative side of the local culture: they are a very stubborn people, he said; *slow to forget*.

And I did some reading about this, and, sure enough, came across this quotation in a book by Kentucky University Press:

Here goes -

"Both grudges and loyalties die so slowly in the quiet of the wooded hill country that it is entirely possible that some of the issues touched in this book' - a history of the Civil War - 'may still be controversial even to third and fourth generations[s] ...who remember [the] old stories' - *and cling to them fiercely*. [n.8]

(Just think on the Hatfields and the McCoys.)

And I've gained some personal experience of this:

Rebekah and I spoke to a lady one day - in the narthex out there - who "just can't stand preachers quoting Lincoln, like he's some big hero."

And if this is you - if you are someone that likes to hold on tightly to grievances and the memory of slights - stop.

We've got to seize hold of a new, higher standard - the Bible's standard:

Not "an eye for an eye." [Lev. 24:19]

That was an ancient concession by God to men whose hearts were hard, (but still useful in curtailing endless, bloody vendettas in a region and in an era where they tended to escalate and emptied whole villages).

No, the higher, better, much needed standard was always what Jesus teaches us: to love *even our enemies*.

He wasn't just talking about Soviets or al-Qaeda.

He meant those in our families - our co-workers and other members of this congregation - who, we find, "put our nose out-of-joint."

He means that person who gave us poor customer service at the checkout or in the restaurant.

He means our own children when they misbehave.

We make these ordinary people our enemies when we fail to forgive them.

And Jesus didn't just say that we should forgive - and then forgive again and again.

He *showed* us what this looks like: on the Cross.

We were His "enemies" - as sinners.

Paul has no qualms about calling us as much in (the Letter to the) *Hebrews*[10:27] and elsewhere.

But - *John* 3:17 - Jesus didn't come 'into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'

And having, then, been offered, undeservedly, a chance of new - *and eternal* - life, how can I not offer "fresh starts" to those who've hurt and maligned me - but in far less significant ways?

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. Westervelt, Eric and Brosher, Barbara (19th of February), 'Scrubbing The Past To Give Those With A Criminal Record A Second Chance', available at <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/19/692322738/scrubbing-the-past-to-give-those-with-a-criminal-record-a-second-chance> (accessed February 22, 2019).
2. Berler, Ron (19th of March, 2017), 'Illinois Parolees: Often Undereducated, Unemployed - and Soon Back Behind Bars', *Chicago Tribune*, available at <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/commentary/ct-illinois-prisoners-undereducated-recidivate-college-parole-perspec-0320-jm-20170317-story.html> (accessed February 22, 2019).
3. Michelle, Clémence (4th of February, 2019), 'Liam Neeson Interview: Rape, Race and How I Learnt Revenge Doesn't Work', *The Independent*, available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/liam-neeson-interview-rape-race-black-man-revenge-taken-cold-pursuit-a8760896.html> (accessed February 22, 2019).
4. *Ibid.*
5. Rose, Steve (6th of February, 2019), 'Is Liam Neeson Cancelled? Of Course not - he's played this character for Years', *The Guardian*, available at <https://www.msn.com/en-gb/entertainment/celebrity/is-liam-neeson-cancelled-of-course-not-hes-played-this-character-for-years/ar-BBTfoD2?li=BB0PWjQ> (accessed February 22, 2019).
6. See: Roberts, Nigel (4th of February, 2019), 'Twitter Reacts To Liam Neeson Wanting To Kill Some "Black Bastard"', available at <https://newsone.com/playlist/liam-neeson-kill-black-people-twitter-reacts/item/14> (accessed

February 22, 2019).

7. See: Manniche, Lise (1999), *Sacred Luxuries: Fragrance, Aromatherapy, and Cosmetics in Ancient Egypt*, Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 129-130, 135.
8. The novelist Herbert E. Stower as quoted in Sandow, Robert M. (2010), "'Grudges and Loyalties Die So Slowly": Contested 'Memories of the Civil War In Pennsylvania's Appalachia', in Slap, Andrew L., (Ed.), *Reconstructing Appalachia: The Civil War's Aftermath*, Lexington, K. Y.: The University Press of Kentucky, pp. 269-292, 284.