

“God is not fair but...”
Genesis 45:1-15

Life Is Unfair.

“Life is unfair.” “Life is unfair!” I’ve known this since I was a little kid. As you know my father was a pastor, maybe a conservative one. In the Bible, the firstborn son receives a greater portion of inheritance and he somehow applied this rule to my brother and me. So, my brother who is 11 months older than me always received more allowance and New Year’s cash gift. There was only a small amount of difference, but I felt it was not fair! So, I understand why Jacob stole Esau’s birthright.

Life is unfair! [ppt] While the Lady of Justice is blindfolded, we all know that, in reality, there's one law for the rich, and another for the poor. You may recall the college admission scandal in 2019. A number of wealthy parents, including famous actresses and business leaders, were accused of using illegal means to secure spots for their children at prestigious universities in the United States. In one case, a famous actress paid \$ 15,000 to a proctor to correct her daughter’s SAT answers. Do you know the verdict? She was sentenced to 14 days in prison, \$30,000 fine, 250 hours of community service, and a year of supervised release. Is that fair?

Unlike this rich actress, Tanya McDowell, an African American mother, was arrested in 2011 for allegedly enrolling her son in a school district using a false address. She wanted her son to go to a better public school so she used her babysitter’s address. Do you know her verdict? She was sentenced to five years in prison, which was later suspended. Is it fair? Life seems unfair and we want fairness. If some people get away with crimes, we are very disappointed, but if they are people who harmed us or our family directly we will be very angry.

Is It Fair?

In this regard, today’s scripture reading sounds a little offensive. We know this is a beautiful story of forgiveness and reconciliation, but if we are honest, it sounds a little absurd. We all know what Joseph’s brothers did to him. They first threw him into a pit and even wanted to kill him, but they did not dare to stain their hands with the blood of their brother, so they sold him to a caravan as a slave. Joseph’s time in Egypt didn’t always go well. He was in prison for years, but with God’s grace, he rose to second-in-command in Egypt and saved Egypt during a famine. Then, his brothers showed up, hat in hand, needing a government subsidy. They were the ones who made his life miserable and now they had come to Joseph’s court. He might have kicked them to the curb or taken rightful vengeance on them, but instead, Joseph chose to forgive them.

Joseph wept, hugged his brothers and kissed them. How does this sound? Great and beautiful story! Could we do the same? What if your brother deceived you into being a co-signer for his new business and disappeared with all the money, and the bank took your house and car causing your family to live in a dirty motel room for months before moving into a tiny apartment, and you had to have three jobs to pay the debt for a decade. Eventually, with God’s grace, you settled all of that and established a new business. A few years later, you happened to meet your brother on a street. What would your first response be? Could you do as Joseph did to his brothers, hugging and weeping? Forgiving those who have hurt us is not easy, even though they are our kin. Joseph’s story of forgiveness sounds great in the abstract but almost offensive in reality. A philosopher even said, “Hasty forgiveness dilutes evil.” Don’t you think Joseph’s

brothers deserved a little more punishment than they got? How can they get off from their crimes so easily and we all feel ok with that? Is that fair?

“God is not fair but...”

But we must remember that Christians are not supposed to aim for fairness. In fact, Jesus’ teachings are not really fair. Jesus said, “Love your enemies.” Does it sound fair? Not fair! Do good to those who hate you. Not fair! Bless those who curse you. Not fair. Pray for those who abuse you. Not fair! Repay no one evil for evil. Not fair. Many teachings of Jesus are not based on fairness.

In fact, God is unfair and God shows us the ultimate example by doing the most unfair thing. Apostle Paul wrote, “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” Does it sound fair? Not fair! “While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.” Not fair! And we’re so grateful for this unfairness of God. God is not fair, but God is merciful and gracious. and we’re called to live this way with others. When we experience God’s mercy and grace, we can move beyond the standard of fairness and gradually move toward forgiveness.

Should we forgive? We all know the answer, but we must acknowledge that forgiveness is really hard in reality. In his book, "The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness," Simon Wiesenthal, a Holocaust survivor and human rights activist, shared his experience in a concentration camp. We all know about the horrific conditions in the Nazi camps and 89 members of the Wiesenthal family were killed. One day, he was taken to the bedside of a mortally wounded SS officer. The officer confessed to his involvement in terrible atrocities against Jews. His company locked Jews in a small house and set fire on it. They shot those who escape from the fire. He asked Wiesenthal, a Jew, for forgiveness. Wiesenthal was uncertain of how to respond and he remained silent and left the room. Wiesenthal left a profound question for all readers. “What would you have done?” I don’t know the answer, so please think about this question. Forgiveness is complicated and challenging. It means that we should never say to anyone “forgive them because you are Christians or Jesus taught us to forgive.” That can be unintentional violence toward those who have already carried heavy burdens. Our job is not to make anyone forgive someone. Our job is to be companions and faithful friends to people on their healing journey.

Forgiveness is healing process

Forgiveness is a healing process. It’s a process. If you have not forgiven someone who hurt you badly, it’s o.k. Don’t pretend that you have already forgiven them. The concealed wound can rupture again and never healed properly. Memories of past wounds can be a prison. We need to be healed and liberated from them, though it takes some time to heal. Instead of forcing forgiveness of perpetrators, you need to face your wounds honestly and try to remember the past correctly and justly. Bring all your wounds and memories to God.

One of the reasons forgiveness is so difficult, is that we are entrapped by binary understanding. We may see ourselves as victims and others as perpetrators, but when we bring our stories into God’s story, we can see our past from a new perspective and that open a fissure on the thick wall in the prison of our memories. That is what happened to Joseph.

Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life." (4-5) Joseph overcame the binary

framework between victims and perpetrators. He discovered a new meaning for his suffering by weaving his stories of wounds into God's story of salvation. Joseph was able to forgive his brothers, not because they were his kin, but because he was liberated from old grudges by finding new meaning in his painful past in God. My friends, I cannot tell you to forgive someone, but as your friend and pastor, I can walk with you on your journey of forgiveness. If you need my prayer or someone to talk to about this difficult stuff of forgiveness, please come and see me.

Our God is unfair, but God is merciful and gracious. God doesn't want us to be imprisoned by past wounds, dying in resentment. In a most unfair way, God forgives and embraces us and shows us to break the prison of the past. Maya Angelou wrote, "It's one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself, to forgive. Forgive everybody." Forgiveness is a gift we learn from God. Take your time but don't give up on your difficult journey of forgiveness. God will continue to hold you close and walk your journey with you to the end. Amen.