

Weekly Reading – Monday, September 8, 2008

The themes of life in community and getting along with others continue, now with the theme of forgiveness coming to the fore, particularly in the Genesis and Matthew lessons. Let me insert a parenthetical exhortation here. The most important thing mainline churches and preachers can do is to take the Scripture seriously. Period. This means really attending to it, struggling with it, and listen to what it is telling us about the nature, purposes and character of God. I cannot believe how blase many churches are about Scripture. When Scripture is not taken seriously, as is often the case, there just isn't much to go on. "God" becomes a vague abstraction and the Christian life is reduced to "being nice." I understand that in many churches the congregation doesn't take the Scripture seriously, but preachers should not adjust to the congregation but challenge it.

Genesis 50: 15 – 21

This is the final scene, almost a coda, to the great dramatic story of Joseph and his brothers. Though Joseph had already forgiven them, his brothers hadn't really absorbed or trusted that forgiveness. When father Jacob died, the brothers feared that Joseph would now exact his revenge. It's hard to "get" forgiveness I guess. We seem to think there's some catch. Joseph's response to their trumped up story of Jacob's deathbed wish, "Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God?" ties nicely to the Romans text where Paul asserts that we each stand before God's judgment and ought not judge one another. And then, verse 20, that most astonishing words: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended for good, in order to preserve a numerous people." God can use even human sin and violence to accomplish God's purposes. Joseph's brothers cast him into a pit to be rid of him, but slave traders took him to Egypt where, through a twisting tail, Joseph rose to power, power which enabled him to protect the heirs of the promise to Abraham and Sarah when a great famine came. God is not undone by our petty and evil ways, but rules over and works through our sin and evil turning it to his purposes. Such is our hope and faith.

Romans 14: 1 – 12

Life in community. Life in community with people whose ways and mores are different than your own. The two particular issues here are food, which foods are okay to eat and which are not; and special days, holy days, observance days. Paul terms those who hold to many strictures in such matters as "the weak," seemingly because they do not know the fullness of Christian liberty. But Paul cautions "the strong" not to let their liberty become an occasion for smugness or disdain for others who aren't as liberated as they. It is first of all a text for life in Christian community, but it's also an interesting text for our emerging multi-cultural world, where we bump into the different ways and practices of different cultures. But Paul's answer to this is not merely humanistic tolerance, but theological accountability. We each live, not to ourselves, but to God. The important thing is that each of us be "fully convinced in our own minds," of the value of particularly dietary practices or observance days. When we are not "convinced in our own minds" we are perhaps more likely to judge others and be threatened by their non-conformance or by their conformance. So Paul says, in matters such as these, make up your own mind before God. The last two words are key, "before God." In

the end, God is the one who judges us and before whom we are accountable. Spend less time worrying about your neighbor's behaviors and more time being sure that, before and unto God, your own are acceptable. It's a bit like the words of Jesus in Mark, "have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another."

When I was a kid Catholics all ate fish on Fridays, but we Protestants did not. Some churches baptize by immersion, some by sprinkling. Some clergy wear vestments, others do not. About such matters, Paul says, "let each be convinced in their own minds," and remember that each of us lives before and unto God our true and only judge.

Matthew 18: 21 - 35

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant writes the message in very large, exaggerated, cartoonish letters. But before getting into the parable, attend to the preceding two verses where Peter wants to have specific guidance on how much forgiveness is enough forgiveness. Jesus' answer is pretty much along the lines of, "Wrong question! This is not just a human thing, it's a God thing. God followers have tossed out their account books and ledgers." Then the parable which is hardly subtle, as if to say to Peter, and to us, "What part of this don't you get?" Don't you get that God has forgiven us each such a vast sum that to not forgive one's fellow human beings a little bit is truly incomprehensible. The tricky part of it is the threat. Is Jesus saying, "If you don't forgive others, God won't forgive you." Maybe. He could also be saying, "In not forgiving others, you have missed the forgiveness God has already accorded you." (see Genesis and Joseph's brothers who had "missed" the forgiveness granted them already). Read this way hell is not so much the punishment for not forgiving as it is where we live when we have not known and received God's already vast grace to us. Of course, forgiveness is a complex matter, and forgiving does not mean that a person ought not be accountable. Forgiveness is not license for abuse. Forgiveness begins a process of grace and sanctification. Or as Bonhoeffer put it, "grace may be free, but its not cheap."