

# Evil Into Good

Presented by Pastor Scott Walters on 9/13/20

At Crossroads United Methodist Church

Waunakee, WI

Two mean-looking guys on motorcycles pulled into a truck stop cafe where a truck driver, a little guy, was sitting at the counter, quietly eating his lunch. The two tough guys saw him, grabbed his food, and laughed in his face. The truck driver didn't say a word. He got up, paid for his food and walked out.

One of the bikers, unhappy that they hadn't succeeded in provoking the little man into a fight, bragged to the server, "He sure wasn't much of a man, was he?"

The server replied, "No, I guess not." Then, glancing out the window she added, "I guess he's not much of a truck driver, either. He just ran over two motorcycles."

The familiar saying, "Don't get mad, just get even" sums up the world's philosophy of how to deal with someone who wrongs you. But the scripture suggests that there is another way. There is a way in contrast to the world's way. This is the way of life that we recently celebrated in celebrating the life and work of Congressman John Lewis. God prescribes a radical approach when we are wronged:

The Way described by Paul when he said to "forgive one another just as God in Christ has forgiven us."

Now, it's easy to say that, but it's tough to apply it. The difficulty increases in proportion to how badly you've been hurt. When you've been hurt badly, you don't feel like forgiving the person, even if he repents, at least not until he's suffered a while. You want him to know what it feels like. You want him to pay.

Some of you are struggling with those feelings right now. Your pain may be from a recent event, or it may go back for years. You might ask, "Can I root out bitterness and truly forgive those who have wronged me?"

Joseph had to avoid bitterness and learn to forgive. He had been repeatedly hurt, but he didn't develop a trace of bitterness. His own brothers had planned to kill him, but sold him into slavery at the last moment. As Potiphar's slave, Joseph's life is a classic lesson on how to overcome bitterness. He was faithful and upright, but was falsely accused of attempted rape by Potiphar's wife. He spent years in prison and was forgotten by a man he had helped, who could have pled his case with Pharaoh. Yet in spite of all this, Joseph never grew bitter toward God or toward those who had wronged him.

The story about Joseph is a story about the growing pains of a human being and, because of him, a people that would eventually become a nation.

Today's passage is the last chapter in the Joseph story – and the last chapter in the Book of Genesis. Let me remind you of how the story of Joseph ends, for it is a remarkable ending. Joseph forgave his brothers with those now epic words. "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good..."

In fact, five chapters earlier, Joseph had already forgiven them. They must have, however, not fully believed him, for after their father Jacob died, they approached their brother again, begging him for forgiveness. Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, and again, Joseph forgave them.

The act of forgiving is not incidental to the story. Only by ending with forgiveness is a new beginning possible.

In her book entitled, The Human Condition, Hannah Arendt wrote so clearly on the creative power of forgiveness. As a Jew who lived in Germany under the Nazi regime and later fled to Paris and then to

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the United States, Arendt must have known intimately how difficult forgiveness can be, and yet she wrote: . . . . Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.

Forgiveness, Arendt knew, is freedom. It is freedom from the baggage that we carry when someone has wronged us. Forgiveness is freedom because it is not a reaction from being provoked. Instead, it arises freely from within the forgiver.

When Jane and I were dating, there came a time when she asked me the question, "Scott, what is your intention?"

When can ask the same question of Joseph's brothers about all the miserable things they perpetuated on their own brother. And ultimately, we'll never know the answer to those questions about their intent.

God's intent, however, is clear. God intends only the best for you and for me.

Some people may be concerned, and rightly so, that providence implies a God who manipulates and controls human affairs, leaving no room for our freedom.

- Could it be instead that forgiveness is the cardinal manifestation of God's providence at work?
- Could it be that forgiveness is the most powerful, providential re-ordering of the world?

Without erasing the wrong that happens in human affairs, forgiveness makes possible something new, something that never existed before.