

Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-22

We would say that oxygen in the air is that which allows us to live. The air which the Church breathes is the air of forgiveness. That is our oxygen as Christians. Christ is here in Word and Sacrament to forgive your sins. Breathing in that forgiveness, we have life. We cannot live without it. And that is why Jesus meets us here in worship—to give us eternal life by forgiving us.

In our Scripture readings for today we encounter two individuals; both of them in the Church; separated only by time; both breathing in the same sweet air of forgiveness. And yet, one of them is breathing in deeply, and the other is taking only shallow breaths of that sweet air. Joseph and Peter are these two individuals. Can you tell which of them is breathing in deeply the rich air of forgiveness, and which one is not?

Let's begin with Joseph. His brothers had sold him into slavery in Egypt. They willfully, intentionally sinned against him. His life—the life he knew and loved growing up—was taken from him. While in Egypt, Joseph worked hard as a slave. He was persecuted for doing right. He unjustly spent time in prison. And, years later, he meets his brothers again...those wicked scoundrels who had hated him. And in our lesson for today, they come to Joseph begging for mercy.

What does Joseph do? He is now in such a position of power that he could harm them, or even have them put to death. But he does the only thing he can do. He is a member of God's Church—a believer in the promised Savior. He lives in that air of forgiveness. He breathes in that sweet oxygen. He believes that all his sins are forgiven by God. Therefore, he can do nothing else except to forgive his brothers.

His words to them are worth noting: Don't be afraid, he said, am I in the place of God? That is a question you and I should ask ourselves every day. When someone sins against you, ask yourself: Am I in the place of God? In other words...what would God do in my place? We see His answer in the cross. Jesus died for every sinner. He died for you. He died for the person who sinned against you. That sin—that sinner, is forgiven.

Are you in the place of God when someone sins against you? Yes. Not to punish, but to forgive. Not to say, "I will not forgive you," but to forgive. Not to think, "I hope you rot in hell for what you did to me," but to give them what God has given you in Christ—eternal life in heaven, by giving them Jesus.

"Am I in the place of God?" said Joseph to his brothers. What kind of "God" did those brothers expect to see? A God of mercy...or a God of anger? A God who would forgive them...or who would punish them? They expected to be severely punished for their sins, but Joseph showed them a God who is merciful. The brothers were well aware of how wickedly they had treated Joseph. God punishes the wicked. They were terrified of what Joseph might do to them. "Am I in the place of God?" Joseph asked. Yes, he was. But the question is: Who is God? Joseph showed them who God is. He forgave them. He treated them with kindness. He did not hold a grudge against them. He did not seek revenge upon them. Joseph, because he was in the place of God, forgave their wickedness toward him.

Whenever someone sins against you, you are in the place of God. What kind of “God” will you show them? A God who hates sinners...or a God who is merciful to sinners? A God who died for all...or only for some? When we do not forgive those who sin against us, we are telling them that Jesus did not die on the cross for them. We are telling them that their sin is too great to be forgiven.

That is a lie. When someone sins against you, and you do not forgive them, you are hurting them worse than they hurt you. Your sin against them, in refusing to forgive, is worse than their sin against you—whatever it was. For they sinned against you—but you sin against Christ; against His cross, when you do not forgive. You are denying that Jesus died for them, even though He did. You are trying to send that person to hell, even though God wants all to be saved.

Joseph could not do that. He could not deny the cross to his brothers. He could not withhold forgiveness from them, because he knew that God forgives. God had forgiven him. God had forgiven his brothers. Because Joseph lived in that sweet air of forgiveness, he could do no less than give that forgiveness to his brothers.

And now let’s look at Peter. Sadly, we are often more like Peter, than like Joseph. When we are sinned against, we tend to sound like Peter—“Do I have to forgive...again?” If you were given 100 million dollars as a gift—you did nothing to earn it—every bit of it was just given to you, and someone asked you for a penny...would you give it to them? But here’s Peter asking the One who gave him that tremendous gift: Do I have to give my pennies away? And that’s us—every time we withhold forgiveness from another.

Friend, you will never run out of pennies, for God keeps forgiving you. And He will never stop. Because this is who God is. He is a God who forgives. The cross proves it. Jesus died for every sinner. And so God is constantly, in Word and Sacrament, filling our lives with the rich air of forgiveness.

From your baptism...to the Lord’s Supper...to the word of forgiveness spoken by the pastor...to the sermons...to the Scripture readings...to the hymns...to the liturgy...to the teaching of God’s Word in Bible Classes, Midweek Classes, and opening devotions—it’s all about forgiveness. Christ and His cross permeates everything which is said and done in His Church, just as oxygen fills the air we breathe.

God wants each and every one of us to believe that we are forgiven through Jesus Christ our Savior. And because we’re forgiven, heaven is ours. Life after death is guaranteed. Nothing can keep you out of heaven, because your sins are all forgiven. Do you have to forgive others to be forgiven? No. You are forgiven...period. Will you forgive others because you are forgiven? Yes. Because that’s the life of those in the Church. We breathe in God’s forgiveness to us, and we breathe out forgiveness to others. Do we have to forgive? No...we can’t help but forgive, because God has forgiven us in Christ.

Was Peter in Jesus’ Church? Yes he was. Was Peter as forgiving to others as Joseph was? No he was not. But Peter was just as forgiven as Joseph. Jesus died for them both. Peter just needed to breathe in more deeply the rich air of God’s forgiveness to him.

That's what we need, too. If I'm having trouble forgiving another, then I just need more of Christ. I need to see Him taking my place on the cross. I need to see Him becoming the wicked sinner in my place; being punished for all my sins.

Friend, in Jesus Christ, God has forgiven you completely. You will not go to hell. Jesus took your place there. He gives you heaven. And because you believe this, by the grace of God, you will become less like Peter and more like Joseph. Amen.