**Sunday 17th**

**September 2023**

**Proper 19 | Ordinary 24**

**The Rev’d Cara Heafey**

**Call to Worship**

Come, all you weary ones, you hopeful ones, you hurting ones.
Bring your grateful hearts and your tender wounds. You are welcome here.

Lean into the grace that invites you onto holy ground.
Breathe in the love that surrounds you. You are welcome here.

**Come, Spirit of God,** **playful and wild.**
**Truth-teller, change-bringer**. **You are welcome here.**

**Prayer of Approach and Confession**

God-in-Trinity, we praise you.

 In your very being, you are relationship, you are love,

 and you long to draw us into communion

 with you, with the earth, with one another.

Faithful one, we praise you.

 You walked with your creatures in the garden,

 you journeyed with your people in the desert,

 you go where we go, you meet us where we are.

 Patient one, we praise you.

 For not giving up on us.

 For promising never to leave us.

 For loving us, for better or worse.

Forgive us for the divisions between us,

the grudges we cling to, the hurts we cherish,

and the harm we have done in your name.

Shake us from our lazy assumptions and lame excuses.

Help us to heal broken friendships, and all we have neglected to tend or repair.

Relieve us of the burdens that you never asked us to carry:

the burden of being right,

the burden of keeping score.

May we love one another, as you have loved us. **Amen.**

**Assurance of Grace**

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God’s holy name.

**Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all God’s benefits—**

who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,

**who redeems your life from the Pit,**

**who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,**

who satisfies you with good as long as you live

so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.

**The Lord works vindication** **and justice for all who are oppressed.**

God made known holy ways to Moses,

**God’s own acts to the people of Israel.**

The Lord is merciful and gracious,

slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

**God will not always accuse,** **nor will God keep angry for ever.**

God does not deal with us according to our sins,

**nor repay us according to our iniquities.**

For as the heavens are high above the earth,

so great is God’s steadfast love towards those who fear God;

**as far as the east is from the west,**

**so far God removes our transgressions from us.**

*Psalm 103:1-12 (Rejoice & Sing 714, stanzas 1-6)*

**Prayer for Illumination**

Come, Holy Spirit.

Breathe life into the ancient words of Scripture.

Open our ears to hear; our hearts and our lives to be transformed. **Amen.**

**Readings**

*Genesis 50:15-21* | *St Matthew 18:21-35*

**All-age Introduction Ideas**

To help unlock the Genesis passage a reminder of the bigger story of Joseph and his brothers may be helpful. It’s a great story full of suspense, emotion, surprise twists and adventure! Loads of potential for creative and interactive storytelling. Here are 3 ideas:

* Bring a basket or bag of props/clues. Take them out one by one and ask the congregation how they are connected with Joseph’s story. Eg: a colourful coat/fabrics, a dreamcatcher or a packet of *Dreamies* (cat treats), a circle of black fabric you could place on the floor (to represent a pit), etc. Pictures could be used instead of props, if easier. Make the connections slightly quirky to add humour and engage the grown-ups too (eg. full-cream milk and skimmed milk, to represent the fat cows and thin cows of Pharoah’s dreams)! Hopefully with the props or pictures as prompts the congregation will be able to tell the story together, piece by piece. Be prepared to fill in the gaps if needed.
* Read aloud *The Lion Storyteller Bible* version, “Joseph the Dreamer”.
* Tell the story yourself! This is best done without written notes and with lots of expression and enthusiasm. At various points in the story, pause to ask your listeners, “how do you think Joseph’s brothers feel?” “How do you think Joseph feels?”

**Sermon Notes**

The readings I’ve chosen from the lectionary are about forgiveness. A huge, rich, topic.

The Genesis story of Joseph and his brothers is an epic family saga and a nice example of restorative justice. The forgiveness Joseph extends to his brothers is comprehensive, but not unconditional. First, he tests them (see Genesis 44) to find out whether they have learned from the past and changed. Today’s passage sees the brothers fully reconciled after long years of conflict, separation and hurt, and united in grief for their father. An emotional and satisfying conclusion.

The Gospel reading is somewhat troubling on first reading. Are we to forgive because we are forgiven, transformed by grace? Or are we to forgive on pain of punishment? The words of verses 34 and 35, with their reference to torture, are chilling.

It helps to appreciate the hyperbolic tone of the parable. Perhaps it’s not meant to be heard literally and soberly but is using an extreme illustration to poke gentle fun at Peter and drive home the central point: we are all sinners, we are all forgiven, we are to live in the light of this, breathing in and exhaling grace. Evidence of exaggeration (that we might miss) can be seen in the amounts of money spoken of. Ten thousand talents was a ridiculous, inconceivable amount for a slave to owe his master. A single talent would have constituted many years’ wages for a labourer.[[1]](#footnote-1) It was absurd for the slave to ask for time to pay off an unpayable debt, and the slave’s treatment of his fellow-slave was unreasonable to the point of comedy, “seizing him by the throat” for a debt of a hundred denarii, a comparatively miniscule sum. Jesus isn’t describing God as a fickle, furious debt-collector. He is being a storyteller, using language of excess to lampoon Peter’s suggestion that there ought to be a limit to our forgivingness.

There’s a quote I heard once and have appreciated since, though I’ve been unable to find out its provenance. It goes something along the lines of this: “God is Master of the Arts and of all the Sciences. But God is *terrible* at Maths.” In God’s economy one sheep has greater value than ninety-nine, the widow’s penny is prized above the large contributions of the wealthy, five loaves and two fish are enough to feed five thousand hungry people with twelve basketfuls left over, the last is first and the least the greatest. Forgiveness is bad maths, too. “An eye for an eye” is logical. “Turn the other cheek” is not. Jesus’ talk of forgiveness was arguably his most controversial teaching, the thing that got the religious authorities the most riled-up. The trouble with grace is, it’s not fair! It makes a mockery of all our comparing and measuring, our attempts to earn our way to holiness, our scorekeeping and gatekeeping, our preoccupation with who’s ‘in’ and who’s ‘out.’

Nadia Bolz-Weber, writing about the theology of the cross, says “Maybe the Good Friday story is about how God would rather die than be in our sin-accounting business anymore.” It could be said that the Church has been (and continues to be) in the sin-accounting business, instead of preaching the Good News (“your sins are forgiven”) and living as those who have been set free. Forgiveness, remember, sets both parties free, the one forgiven *and* the one who was wronged. A grudge is a heavy and cancerous burden to carry, reluctant though we can be to set it down.

What does limitless forgiveness, forgiveness that does not keep score, look like? Does it mean letting evil and injustice go unchallenged? No. This passage needs to be read in the context of the preceding verses (v.15-20). The community has a responsibility to bring issues into the light, confront abusers, support and empower victims, speak the truth in love.

**Prayers of Intercession**

*These prayers have a simple call-and-response refrain which plays with a familiar phrase from the Lord’s Prayer. In place of “kingdom” I have used the alternative “kin-dom”, a word which conveys the idea that we are family, we belong to one another.*

Merciful and Holy One, Mother of us all,

 we pray for the world you so love.

Thank you for the beauty of this season, as summer begins to soften into autumn.

 Thank you for earth’s bounty: enough for us all.

 Nature holds and heals us.

 But it bears the scars of our carelessness and greed.

 Help us to learn habits that will restore harmony and balance.

 Make us advocates for the earth and agents of healing and peace.

 Your kin-dom come **Your will be done**

 Today we pray for all who have been abused.

 Those for whom home… or church… has not been a place of safety.

We pray for those who are unable to forgive

 because the wounds they carry are too deep or too raw.

May those whose dignity has been stolen…

whose trust has been violated…

whose stories have been silenced…

 experience your solidarity and your healing.

 Give us courage to speak the truth,

and to challenge evil and injustice wherever we find them.

 Your kin-dom come **Your will be done**

 Today we remember the places in the world where there is conflict.

 *[An opportunity here to name places of concern]*

We bring to you the conflict within our own communities,

in our own friendships and families, in our own lives.

We pray for peace like a river, restoring life and hope

to landscapes devastated by war, and to hearts hardened by hatred.

Open our eyes to our common humanity.

Help us break the cycle of violence.

 Your kin-dom come **Your will be done.**

Lastly, we pray for ourselves.

May your grace wash over and around us,

casting out fear and shame,

healing the wounds we carry,

blessing and transforming every part.

 May your compassion for us soften our hearts,

 setting us free to love and forgive with generous and joyful abandon.

 Your kin-dom come **Your will be done.** **Amen.**

**Blessing**

Beloved, let’s love as we have been loved,

 let’s forgive as we have been forgiven,

 let’s allow grace to flow in and spill out of our lives,

 healing and blessing as it goes.

 And may the bountiful, beautiful, blessing of God,

 Source, Saviour and Spirit

 be yours today and always. **Amen.**

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| **Hymn Suggestions** |
|  | R&S | CH4 | StF | MP |
| Amazing Grace | 92 | 555 | 440 | 31 |
| Great God, your love has called us here | 339 | 484 | 499 |  |
| Forgive our sins as we forgive | 84 | 486 | 423 |  |
| The love of God is broad like beach and meadow | 108 |  |  |  |
| There’s a wideness in God’s mercy | 353 | 187 | 416 |  |
| The Lord is gracious and compassionate |  |  |  | 1111 |
| Just as I am, without one plea | 364 | 553 | 556 | 396 |
| Dear Lord and Father of mankind | 492 | 485 | 495 | 111 |
| Come thou fount of every blessing | 360 |  | 494 |  |

RS – *Rejoice and Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP – *Mission Praise*

*Other music ideas (either of these could be played or sung alongside or in place of the prayer of confession):*

* Kyrie Eleison by the Wild Goose Worship Group: [Kyrie Eleison - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVlzzaUNv8o)
* Lord, have mercy by Resound Worship: [Lord have mercy (Kyrie) // Resound Worship - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBltQ-5cnO4)
1. See commentary by Charles Campbell in *Feasting on the Word* (2011, edited by David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)