

The Power of Forgiveness

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Rev. Tom Ott

First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
145 Capital Ave., NE
Battle Creek, MI 49017
269·965·1225
www.fccb.org

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Genesis 50: 15-21**

Troy Davis was executed in Georgia last Wednesday for the 1989 murder of off duty police officer Mark MacPhail. Davis had maintained his innocence all along. Seven of the nine key witnesses whose testimony helped convict him had subsequently recanted all or parts of their testimony, but state and federal courts repeatedly upheld the conviction. He was killed at 11:08 p.m. by lethal injection.

The controversy surrounding Davis' execution has centered on the question of certainty: Is it right to execute someone when there is any uncertainty about his guilt? But today as we begin our four week conversation on forgiveness, the question that we must wrestle with goes deeper than that: Is absolute certainty justification for executing someone?

I believe that even if Troy Davis was guilty, it is impossible for us to reconcile the Biblical call to forgive with the practice of state sponsored execution. The only justification for state sponsored execution is vengeance. The family of the victim deserves to see their loved one's death avenged. But that is not the justice that Jesus commended to us. That is the human desire for vengeance, and it has no place in our faith. The scriptures are very clear about that: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord (Romans 12:19)." That is not our work to do. Our work is not to "repay evil for evil...but to overcome evil with good (Romans 12: 17, 21)." Our faith never authorizes vengeance. Instead it insists that we forgive. There are no exceptions, no exclusions, and no disclaimers: "Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive (Colossians 3:13)."

It is impossible to forgive someone and then intentionally

do them harm. You can't forgive a person and then support their execution. Forgiveness always yields compassion. In fact, compassion is the evidence of forgiveness. When forgiveness is granted it nullifies our hostility and our desire for vengeance. Forgiveness and acts of love go hand and hand. We cannot love without forgiving, and we cannot forgive without loving.

Today as we begin our sacred conversation on forgiveness the theme we are exploring is the Power of Forgiveness, and Troy Davis' execution helps us recognize what is at stake in this important conversation. We don't have a lot of power ourselves, but there are powerful forces at work in the world. There are powerful forces of good that bring healing, hope, and the promise of reconciliation to the world. They are the forces of God at work in the world. They take shape everywhere and everyday through countless acts of mercy, compassion, and kindness. And there are powerful forces of evil that bring destruction, sorrow and alienation into the world. They are the forces that thwart God's purposes in the world. They take shape everywhere and everyday through countless acts of vengeance, violence, and hostility. And everywhere and everyday we have to decide which of those two powerful forces we will align ourselves with.

Whenever we choose to withhold forgiveness, we choose to align ourselves with powerful forces of evil. We give vengeance, violence and hostility power in our lives and nothing good ever comes of that. Even when we feel justified in withholding forgiveness, it never brings joy or satisfaction into our lives. It doesn't heal our injuries or take away our sorrow. On the contrary, it closes us off from what is good and Godly in the world.

I think that is what Joseph realized in our text this morning from the closing chapter of the book of Genesis. Joseph had suffered terrible injustice at the hands of his own siblings. He had always been the favored son of his father Jacob who showered him with special attention, privileges

and gifts. His brothers deeply resented him for it. Over the years their hostility towards Joseph became so intense that they plotted to murder him and make it look like he had been attacked and killed by a wild animal. One day while they were a long way from home tending their father's flocks, they seized Joseph, stripped him of the beautiful coat his father had given him, rolled it in blood and then cast him down into a deep pit. They were about to leave him there to die when a caravan of Ishmaelite traders came along and the opportunistic siblings decided to change their plan and sold their brother Joseph into slavery instead. The Ishmaelites carried Joseph away from his home and took him to Egypt where he became the slave of a man named Potiphar, the captain of the guard in Pharaoh's household.

Because of the treachery of his siblings, Joseph grew up separated from his family. His life in Egypt took many twists and turns. Sometimes things were so bad for Joseph that he was overwhelmed with despair. Sometimes opportunities opened doors for Joseph in Egypt that never would have been possible back in Cana. Joseph was falsely accused of sexual assault by Potiphar's wife and languished for years in an Egyptian prison. But Joseph had a gift for interpreting dreams, and one day Pharaoh summoned him to interpret disturbing dreams that had been keeping him up at night. Joseph told Pharaoh that his dreams were warning him to prepare for a terrible famine and to store up sufficient crops to see his people through the coming draught. Pharaoh was so impressed with Joseph that he commuted his sentence and appointed him to be his minister of agriculture to prepare the entire country for the looming crisis.

The draught did come and it triggered a huge shortfall of grain throughout the entire region. Joseph's brothers up in Cana began to be in want and were sent to Egypt by their father to seek relief from the famine. Suddenly the brothers who had perpetuated such a travesty against their sibling now found themselves standing before Joseph asking for his

mercy, forgiveness and help.

Joseph had to decide which of those two powerful forces he was going to align his life with. He could have chosen vengeance. He certainly had justification for withholding forgiveness from his siblings. Even their final plea for mercy lacked the sincerity of authentic repentance. It was a shameless attempt to manipulate Joseph by appealing to his loyalty to their father Jacob: “Dad wanted you to forgive us...he told us to tell you so with his dying breath!”

There was no uncertainty about the guilt of the brothers for their crime against Joseph, but there was a great deal of uncertainty about the sincerity of their repentance. When you read the biblical narrative, Joseph’s brothers don’t seem any more trustworthy at the end of the story than they were at the beginning.

But Joseph’s decision to forgive wasn’t based on an assessment of whether or not his siblings had earned his forgiveness by their sincere repentance. It was based on a decision that Joseph made about which of the two powerful forces at work in the world that he wanted to align his life with. After spending most of his life cut off from his family, alienated from his father and his brothers and sister and their spouses and children, after learning of nieces and nephews that he didn’t even know existed, Joseph decided that vengeance, violence and hostility had already consumed enough of his life. He was well acquainted with the tragedy that comes when lives are aligned with the forces of evil that bring destruction, sorrow and alienation into the world and Joseph decided that he wanted to live a different kind of life. Joseph wanted healing, hope and the promise of reconciliation to be at the center of his life and he knew that forgiving his siblings was the first step that he needed to take. A life full of mercy, compassion and kindness began with his decision to forgive: “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good... so have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little

ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them."

The book of Genesis ends with a description of Joseph and his siblings living long and prosperous lives in Egypt. Joseph lived to see three generations of his family grow and mature. Cousins and nieces and nephews and aunts and uncles all lived in close relationship with each other, nurtured in the loving bonds of extended family because of one person's decision to forgive.

We don't have a lot of power ourselves. But there are powerful forces at work in the world, and everywhere and everyday we have to decide which of those powerful forces we want to align our lives with. Whenever we choose to forgive, we choose to align ourselves with the forces of good that bring healing, hope, and the promise of reconciliation to the world. Forgiveness is the power of God that overcomes evil with good. Amen.

