

Waiting in Fear for the Sword to Fall

In the name of him in whom we have been forgiven a debt we could never begin to pay, dear friends in Christ: The Greeks tell a story about a king named Dionysus who lived in the fourth century BC. He was a rich and powerful fellow who knew how to enjoy the perks of his office, and so he'd often throw lavish banquets with tables overflowing with rich foods and fine wines and complete with all kinds of performers and musicians to entertain his guests. And as people in a celebrity position like his often do, he attracted a large number of hangers-on: a small crowd of flatterers and lickspittles all eager to please him and (hopefully) secure for themselves the advantage of his royal favor. Well, one day one of them named Damocles was schmoozing him up real good. He was going on and on about what a wonderful life the king had and the extravagant lifestyle he was so fortunate to enjoy. In response, the king said to him, "You think so, do you? Then perhaps you'd like to trade places with me for a day." Damocles was only too happy to seize the opportunity. Marveling at his good luck, he soon settled in to the king's couch at the banquet table and began filling his plate with delicacies. He was really beginning to enjoy himself when all of a sudden, he noticed that there was a large and very sharp sword suspended directly above him. It was point down and hanging only from a single strand of hair from a horse's tail. It looked like it might snap at any second. "What's *that* all about?" Damocles cried out in fear. "That", said the King, "is the sword of fate." He went on to explain that as good as his life seemed to those not sitting in his place, it was a life lived under constant threat. He said that he was always just a hair away from an assassin's knife, or a political coup by his ever-scheming enemies, or a violent death on the battlefield. "I never know", he said, "when the sword of fate will fall. But it's always hanging there right above my head."

As the story goes, Damocles lost his appetite – both for his dinner and for his day in the sun. He was only too happy to relinquish his seat and give it back to the king. But ever since then, the so called "Sword of Damocles" has come to stand for that otherwise unnamed sense of dread we strive so hard to pretend isn't there. It's that nagging worry in the back of your mind that warns you that your life is about as stable as a house of cards. It's that gnawing anxiety that reminds you that as good as your life may become, it could all be over in a snap. I wonder, how many of you have heard the expression "the Sword of Damocles"? How many knew the story behind it?

Well, anyway, the reason I mention it is that the ten brothers of Joseph knew all about living life under such a sword. They feared that one day the vengeance of Joseph, their brother – the one they had hated, abused, very nearly killed, and ultimately sold to slave traders – they feared that the sword of his justifiable anger for all those wicked things they had done to him would fall. The prospect terrified them. And the only straining strand of hair keeping that sword from falling, they thought, was the fast fading life of their feeble old father, Jacob.

I'm sure you remember the background story; but let me just hit a few of the highlights to refresh your memory. The Patriarch Jacob had twelve sons. The ten older sons were born to him by women that he didn't really love and that never intended to marry. (It's a complicated story. No matter.) The younger two sons, however, were born of the one true love of his life, Rachel. These were Joseph and Benjamin. And Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin, leaving Jacob with these two boys as his only living connection to her. So, he shamelessly favored them above the others – and especially he favored the older one, Joseph. Not surprisingly, this made the other brothers jealous. Nor did it help matters that

the Lord sent Joseph a number of prophetic dreams that seemed to foretell a day in the future when he would rule over his brothers – which dreams, in his youthful naiveté, he foolishly told them about. From their perspective it seemed that dad's blatant favoritism had given the little twerp delusions of grandeur, causing them to hate him all the more.

Well it happened one day when Joseph was about fourteen years old that he was sent by his father to check on his brothers who were pasturing the family flocks at a place several days' journey from home. When his brothers saw him approaching, they decided that this was their chance to get rid of him once and for all. For his part, Joseph seems to have been unaware of the depth of their hatred until the moment they pounced on him with murder in their eyes.

Reuben, the oldest brother, like the others didn't have much use for Joseph; but neither did he have stomach for murder. He intervened to save Joseph's life. So, they dropped the boy in a dry well to keep him while they argued about how best to deal with the pest. Most were still for killing him. They laughingly suggested cruel methods for doing the job. Years later, the brothers remembered with remorse how much they had enjoyed hearing the terrified boy's pitiful cries as he begged them to release him. As it happened, a passing caravan provided them with a better option than murder. They were slave traders headed to Egypt. So the brothers sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver. Thus, they earned for themselves a tidy sum *and* they had the cruel pleasure of knowing that instead of dying and being done with it, Joseph would have to endure the bitter existence of an Egyptian slave before he died – probably still quite young.

They returned to their father with Joseph's coat, which they had torn and soaked in goat's blood in order to trick Jacob into believing that his favorite son had been killed by wild animals. When Jacob saw it, he became utterly inconsolable. He spends the next twenty-two years mournfully brooding over his loss; accusing himself, accusing others, refusing to live anywhere but underneath the shadow of his beloved son's death. His unrelenting grief makes life miserable for everyone. Meanwhile, in Egypt, things go from bad to worse for Joseph. Slavery is miserable; but just when things are starting to look up and he gets promoted to a good job in his master's house, he's falsely accused of a crime. He's thrown into a stinking dungeon for seven years. Then, at length, because God has given him the ability to interpret dreams, he is able to warn the Pharaoh of a coming seven-year-long famine. Impressed by his abilities, the Pharaoh promotes him to the second in command of all Egypt. He puts Joseph in charge of preparations for the coming famine. And Joseph, by his insight and ingenuity manages to save the civilized world from death by starvation. Finally, themselves suffering from the famine and having heard that there's plenty of food stored in Egypt, the brothers come to buy grain from Joseph whom they don't recognize. He runs them through several tests to see if they've changed by all that has happened. And then, in a touching display of compassion, Joseph forgives them completely for all the wretched things they did to him. He moves them and their families to Egypt and sets them up to live comfortably under his generous patronage. All is forgiven and forgotten ... that is, except by the ten brothers.

Which brings us up to the action in today's reading. It's seventeen years later. Suddenly the situation changes. Jacob, their old father, dies. And immediately the brothers begin to worry that now Joseph is finally going to get even with them for all the evil they inflicted upon him forty years earlier. "It was all too easy", they think. "How could anyone be as forgiving as that? Joseph has every right to kill us for what we did – and he's got the power to do it. Surely the only reason he didn't do it before was that he knew it would upset

our father. You remember how he was when he thought Joseph was dead? Joseph wouldn't do that to him by killing us. But surely now he's going to make us pay."

Terrified by their guilty consciences and their fear of Joseph's impending revenge, the brothers first try the most time-honored method of escaping justice: they cook up a lie. Because it's their hunch that not wanting to upset Jacob is the reason Joseph hasn't dropped the sword on them yet, they try to extend their father's protection past the grave. What son could turn down his father's dying wish? "He told us to tell you this just before he died, 'Joseph, they're your own flesh and blood brothers. They've made mistakes, sure; oh, but they're good at heart – servants of the same God I taught you to know and love. Forgive them, won't you, please, Joseph? Do it for me, your dear ol' Dad'."

And when Joseph received their message, he wept. He knew they were lying. He knew because he had never told his father how he came to be in Egypt. He withheld this information precisely because he knew how it would hurt his father and ruin his relationship with his ten sons if he knew the truth. Not only had Joseph forgiven his brothers, he had completely hidden their guilt. And now he discovers that for seventeen long years the brothers he truly loved and had sincerely forgiven have been secretly afraid that he was quietly biding his time, waiting for the day he would extract his revenge. Now he realized that every gift he gave them, every act of kindness he showed them, was pure torture, first because it reminded them of how differently they had treated him when they had the power, and secondly because they thought it was all a phony front he put on to lull them into a false sense of security. He realized that he had been literally killing them with his kindness, and that all these years their consciences had been burning with guilt and their hearts trembling with fear. All these years they had been looking at him not as their loving brother – but as their soon-to-be judge and executioner. Small wonder that Joseph wept tears of compassion for his brothers for all the years of agony they had inflicted upon themselves because they did not believe he had truly forgiven them from his heart.

Well, no sooner have they sent their phony message to Joseph than their plan starts to unravel. Guilt breeds doubt and fear. As the Scripture says, "The wicked flee when no one pursues them." So now they start to fret: "What if Joseph ignores the message? What if he decides to get even anyway? What if he knows we're lying? And what if *that* only makes him madder?" Now their future seems even more uncertain. Even if Joseph falls for their lie, the best they can hope for is to prolong the agony of never knowing if or when Joseph might change his mind and strike. "The only way is to make it up to him. We could beg to become his slaves and spend the rest of our lives trying to repay him for what we did." And so, it is that we find them groveling at Joseph's feet pledging lifelong servitude.

And what's most important for us is that we see is that the cause of the brothers' anxiety is not that they haven't been forgiven. They have been. The problem is that *they don't believe it*. This sin, the sin they committed against Joseph, they think is just too big to forgive. They couldn't imagine being able to forgive if they had been in his sandals, so they find it impossible to believe it of him. Minor insults and offenses, sure, people can forgive and forget about them; but not something like this. What we did is just too great an offense. Now the sword is going to fall.

And this, my friends, is one of the biggest problems we have in the Church. Many Christians, perhaps many of us, think exactly the same way. You may have buried in your past a sin, perhaps a number of sins, that you imagine are just too terrible to be forgiven. Or perhaps it didn't seem to be so great a sin in and of itself; but the effects were catastrophic – maybe people died or were seriously injured as a result of your inattention or neglect, or

maybe their lives were ruined. Parents can often feel this way about children whose lives were adversely affected by their actions or lack of them. The adult children of elderly parents can feel these things on account of decisions that have to do with medical treatment or assisted living arrangements. A suicide by a friend or relative can bring on such thoughts. It can be almost anything. And Satan dearly loves to play upon these thoughts and fears and reinforce them. I think you know the kind of thing I'm talking about – and maybe you are one who has such fears. Tucked deep away you have the sense that sooner or later you will be made to pay. If not in this life, then certainly on the Day of Judgment, the sword will fall.

If so, listen to me very carefully: it can't happen. It really can't. Now, you might want to know how I can say that. How can I be so sure? Simple: the sword has already fallen. The sword of God's justice and righteous revenge fell on Jesus when on the cross he suffered and died for the all sins of the entire world. Your sin, however great it might be, or whatever consequences it caused—that sin too was carried by the Lord Jesus. And when he said, "It is finished", the sword had completed its fall. God's justice was satisfied. This was proven by Christ's resurrection. If there had been anymore debt to pay, if there were still unpaid offenses and the curse of death still stood over us, he could not have come back alive. It is finished. And the sword having fallen on Christ once and for all cannot fall again. Because by faith you are in Christ, you have nothing to fear.

It's interesting, in comforting his brothers with the truth of his forgiveness, Joseph asks rhetorically, "Am I in the place of God?" And when he says it, he means that God is the judge, not me; but ask yourself, who really is acting like God in this story? Who was sold for silver, suffered because of the guilt of others, falsely accused, descended to the depths, and was counted as one dead? Who then rose in glory to the right hand of a king, saved the world from certain death, and then freely forgave those who had condemned him? If Joseph is not acting in the place of God – namely in the role of our Lord Jesus – I don't know who is.

Or then again, maybe I do. And I mean that: I do. This is precisely why God places pastors in his Church. They are to stand in God's place and declare his Word of comfort and assurance to repentant sinners. This is why I say when announcing the absolution, "In the stead of and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins." Those are God's Words directly to you through me. And don't worry, I don't have delusions of grandeur. I am not God any more that Joseph was, and I need to hear those words of forgiveness just as much as everyone else. But like Joseph, I and all the other pastors God sends to serve his Church do stand in Christ's place and speak his Words of comfort and forgiveness directly into the hearts of his people. We do this through his Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. We do this in private confession and absolution. And you do it too when you share with someone the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and when you forgive others for the evil they have done to you.

And something else that's worth noting: in this morning's Gospel lesson we have a story of a man who is forgiven an enormous debt – but then he turns around and demonstrates by his actions that he doesn't appreciate it. And here in the brothers of Joseph we have a story of men who were forgiven an enormous debt who demonstrate by their actions that they don't believe it. I suppose that they are in a way the flip sides of the same coin. When we truly believe and understand just how much we have been forgiven, we are able to stand in Christ's place and forgive others. So, may our gracious God continue to speak his Word of comfort and assurance to our hearts, that the Spirit of Christ may dwell within them, and that from our hearts we too may truly forgive those who sin against us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!