



PROCLAMATION POINTS

The following are some thoughts and questions to be used for a text study on the weekly lessons, or for jump-starting the imagination of the preacher and hearer in preparing for the proclamation event.

Now, if there were no one on earth who forgave sins, but there were on Law and works, how timid and miserable a poor distressed conscience would be! But now, when God has filled everyone's mouth so that he can say to another: "Your sins are forgiven," no matter where you are, the golden year has begun.

—Martin Luther—
Church Postil

Genesis 50:15-21

This text comes at the end of a very long story in Scripture, beginning back in Genesis 37. Joseph, the favored son of Jacob, was sold into slavery by his brothers who were jealous of his relationship with their father. Joseph faced many trials in the foreign land, including false accusations and imprisonment. When God brought him to Pharaoh's attention, Joseph was placed in charge of the granaries of Egypt to prepare for an impending drought. It is that same drought that eventually brings Joseph's brothers to Egypt hoping to buy some food for the family.

When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, he is forgiving and merciful and even brings the whole family down to live with him in Egypt. But now their father Jacob has died, and the brothers are not sure if Joseph considers himself free to take revenge. Once again they beg for his forgiveness and mercy.

- From what you actually see in Scripture, how did Joseph feel? Was he plotting revenge, or was he already in a different place?

Joseph's profound statement, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good," is a remarkably wise and faith-centered analysis, looking back on his life. This is not an easy conclusion for us to reach on our own. Amidst the hurts and trials of life, it is God alone who can work forgiveness in our hearts.

- When have you experienced this same reality of God at work, even in the midst of human sin?
- Why do you suppose our God is so concerned with mercy and forgiveness?

Psalms 103:1-12

In Hebrew terminology, to "bless the Lord" means to praise and give thanks to God. Biblically, to say a "blessing" before we eat a meal, for example, does not mean we are doing anything to the food; we are giving our thanks to God as the giver of the food.

- What are some of the many things that the psalmist is thanking God for here? Which are material benefits, and which are spiritual benefits?

Strictly speaking, the Hebrew language does not have the same past, present, and future tenses that English has. Instead, Hebrew speaks in terms of completed and uncompleted actions.

- In this psalm, how is God praised both for what he has done,

and what he has yet to do? How are the two connected?

Romans 14:1-12

Paul makes a careful distinction between law and gospel, and touches upon what is referred to as *adiaphora*. While this Greek word (meaning "indifferent things") does not appear here in the biblical text, it is a term that is often used by theologians to speak of subjects that are debatable, but not essential to salvation.

In these verses, Paul uses the example of religious dietary restrictions and the celebration of religious holidays. Under the Jewish law, such things literally were "written in stone" and a person was held accountable for obeying them. But with the coming of Christ and the institution of the New Covenant, our Lord set aside a number of the old ceremonial laws.

- When it comes to things that are neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture, in what sense are we (as people of faith) free to use our own discretion? Does this have to be a source of contention when we don't agree?
- In cases where we are free to use our own discretion, why might we refrain from exercising that freedom out of concern for the scruples of others?

Matthew 18:21-35

The question of forgiveness comes up as Peter wants to know how many times he should forgive another person when sinned against. Jesus answers with a riddle of sorts, "Not seven times but seventy-seven times."

Jesus is serious about forgiveness — even if keeping count all the way to seventy-seven is nearly impossible. Perhaps that's the point! We are called to forgive as many times as it takes and stop keeping count or keeping score.

- Why is it so hard for us to forgive repeatedly? Would Jesus say there is a time when we stop forgiving? How is that the same or different from what relationship professionals might say?

Jesus tells a parable using large sums of money and some very unforgiving characters. One servant who was forgiven much was unmerciful toward a fellow servant who owed him a debt smaller than the one he owed his master. When the master found out about the injustice, he was furious for the servant's lack of grace.

- Why is Jesus so adamant that we practice forgiveness repeatedly and extravagantly?