

MIDWEEK LENTEN SERMON #5 – JOSEPH AND JESUS – GENESIS 42:6-24

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

<sup>19</sup> If you are honest men, let one of your brothers remain confined where you are in custody, and let the rest go and carry grain for the famine of your households, <sup>20</sup> and bring your youngest brother to me. So your words will be verified, and you shall not die." And they did so. <sup>21</sup> Then they said to one another, "In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us." <sup>22</sup> And Reuben answered them, "Did I not tell you not to sin against the boy? But you did not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood." (Gen. 42:19-21 ESV) Thus far our text

When we sin against God, which we do every day, we often feel bad about it. When we do wrong to our brother, we often can't get to sleep at night, because we regret what we have done. We play the event over and over in our minds, trying to figure out how we could have reacted better, or said something differently. Our conscience is a God-given gift, that predates the writing of the Ten Commandments upon the tablets of stone. It's not an excuse to never have heard the Law; it's written on our hearts. We know what's right, what's wrong, and what only appears right, but actually is sinful. We are given this conscience by God Himself, and though it is not infallible, it can be stifled and nearly silenced through repeated sinful living. Thanks be to God that we have been given this gift, because it's a reminder to us to continue to strive to live a God-pleasing life in all Godliness and honesty. We know that we are NOT saved through keeping the Law of God, but we gladly keep it out of love and gratitude for all that God has done for us in Christ Jesus. Part of the impetus to keep this Law of God in our lives

comes from our internal sense of right and wrong, bugging us and leading us into what is right, and guiding us away from that which is evil.

In our Old Testament text from Genesis, Joseph's brothers were having a crisis of conscience, if you will. They had sold their brother, Joseph, into slavery, a deed which they tried to comfort themselves by saying that it was preferable to their original plan, which was to kill him outright. More than twenty years had passed by this point. That's a long time for guilt and shame to fester in the heart. To compound the situation, they had lied to their father, Jacob, and told him that Joseph was not only dead, but that he had passed away under violent, untimely circumstances. They were filled with deceit, birthed by jealousy and anger over Joseph telling them his dreams of having superiority over them. At the time, they tried to soothe their consciences by rationalizing their behavior; however, this doesn't work. The conscience continues to chip away at such false righteousness, until the point that it brings about repentance. That's the God-pleasing outcome – that we confess our many sins, and receive His absolution for them. Sometimes it takes a long time for the Holy Spirit to work within us to bring about this true contrition and sorrow for our sins. In the case of the brothers, it took 20 years, along with many other events in the lives of the Israelite people, and a bit of the miraculous guidance of God to bring events about to allow them to approach Joseph again. Even then, it took the brothers being made to think that their youngest brother, Benjamin, was in mortal danger for them to realize their error, and seek Joseph's forgiveness.

Remember the words of the Confession and Absolution in the Divine Service liturgy, taken from 1 John 1:8-9 – “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But, if we confess our sins, God, Who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Read just one verse more, and John clarifies the point even further – if we say that we don't have sin, we make God out to be a liar, and His Word has no place in our lives. Obviously, we don't want to do that! Our conscience is working within us to get us to confess our many sins, our

particular sins that we can call to mind, our sinful nature that clings to us like glue. If we can't think of a single sin that we've committed, Luther reminds us that we'd better "pinch ourselves", because we might be in heavenly glory, where the sinful nature is removed. However, if we feel the pinch, then we're still on earth, and should be able to call to mind at least one time where we transgressed the Law of God in our daily lives. If we haven't outwardly sinned (which is impossible), we're still guilty of thinking about it, or glorifying it. Even the desire to sin, which Luther calls *concupiscence*, makes us guilty for the punishment that sin deserves – eternal death in the fires of hell.

Thanks be to God for the second part of this verse – "if we confess our sins, God, Who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Cleansing is an important word to remember here – that's what God does for us. He doesn't just make it so that He and we forget about sin, and don't call it to mind anymore. Rather, He cleanses us from the stain of sin. He gives us robes that have been washed in the blood of the lamb, and made as white as one can imagine. That's a paraphrase from John's Revelation. The blood of Jesus cleanses our wounds, just like blood is called to the fore when we cut our skin. We don't normally think of blood as being a cleanser, but within the body, it actually is. The rush of blood to a wound serves to get impurities out of the way, and expels them out of the body. In the same way, His shed blood on the cross pays the death payment that is necessary. God cannot forget that death must occur for forgiveness to be granted. However, He doesn't demand it of us, that is, eternal death. Rather, He visited it upon Christ, Who was uniquely sinless, uniquely God in the flesh, uniquely able to rise on the third day so that death could not hold Him. Because He shed His blood, and because He rose, and because He is God, we have the hope, guaranteed by God, that the fruits of His sacrifice will be given to us by grace. The gifts of the forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation are given to us by Christ's death and resurrection, delivered to us in the Means of Grace, the Word and the Sacraments.

When we are at the point of not confessing our sins, and trying to cover them up, the conscience can be a scary companion for us. In the case of Joseph's brothers, the other sons of Jacob, it served to give them dread and fear. As Luther says in his Genesis commentary, "These brothers are not only troubled about the sin of which they were conscious – although they took pains to cover and conceal it – but they were also afraid of ALL their words and deeds, and they imagined that there was new guilt in every action or thought." They were continually scared that one of them was going to say something to give away their treachery to their father, Jacob. We know this is true in our lives today. It's been said that the only way to truly keep a secret is to tell no one about it – and that person had better not ever speak of it. Lies compound upon lies, and before we know it, we're telling lies to cover over or confirm our initial lie, and the spiral gets out of control. We even forget our original falsehoods, and the story starts to unravel. Our conscience within us wants us to come clean, and when we fight against it, we're literally fighting against the Holy Spirit's attempt to make us clean. We can get ourselves in trouble, thinking that someone else is going to "blab", or that we ourselves are going to "slip", and this can be debilitating. The conscience doing it's thing is a scary thing, especially if we're actively trying to cover something up.

Don't be afraid of this, however. This fear, this concern, is part of the road to repentance that we all walk every day. The reason that Luther retained the practice of Confession and Absolution in the church was because of the Absolution, which he said was essentially a restatement of the Gospel itself. We aren't to torture ourselves, trying to think of all the sins we've committed, and name them all off in order to be forgiven. This is impossible, and will drive us to madness, this side of heaven! But, what we are to do is to take comfort in the general absolution that we hear every Sunday after we've confessed not only our sins, but our sinfulness, our desire to sin. If there's something that's continually and acutely bothering us, we should seek out a pastor to confess our sins to him, and receive the absolution personally from him, tailored to our specific situation, as from God Himself.

So, as we journey through this season of Lent, part of the process of preparing for Holy Week is to have our conscience do its work. It's natural for us to feel guilty, that our sin was part of the reason that our Savior came and bled and died. If it weren't for the original sin of Adam and Eve, there wouldn't be a need for a Savior – sin would not have entered the world. But, indeed, sin has come, and death through sin. As we hear once again the horrible events of Jesus' passion, our conscience weeps within us, that it was necessary for Him to undergo all of this to effect our salvation. But, thanks be to God, this realization is part of the repentance process. Once we've confessed our sins and our sinful natures, the Holy Spirit rushes in with the absolution, the speaking of the forgiveness wrought by Christ on the cross. Without this calling to mind of our sinful natures, the forgiveness on the cross, and the victory on Easter morning, are hollow and robbed of their poignancy. If we don't call to mind what we've been saved from, it's just like trying to assuage the guilt of our sin by forgetting about it, moving on with life, continuing to tell lies like the brothers did with their father, Jacob. Telling lies to themselves that were more like rationalizations for the dastardly deeds they committed against their own brother, Joseph.

It doesn't work! No matter how we try to bury our guilt and shame, no drink will cover over it, no drug-induced stupor will make us forget it. That's why we have this conscience from God – so that we are reminded of our sin, so we will confess it. When we have a dirty conscience, like Joseph's brothers did, like many times we have, the only way to cleanse it is in the blood of Christ. It washes us clean – that's why it's no mistake that we use the color white for so many things around here. My primary vestment color, the white garment of Baptism, the white on the altar, the white of the funeral pall or the urn pall – all of them show us purity, goodness, cleanliness. Not clean because of anything we've done to make ourselves clean, but spotless because of what Christ has done on our behalf. He has truly done everything for our salvation. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ

Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.