

Sermon Title: **“Joy and Forgiveness”**

Bible: **Exodus 15:1-11, 20-21 & Matthew 18:21-35**

When: on Sunday, September 17, 2023

Where: about 30 people (plus YouTube streaming viewers) at Gilroy UMC

Opening Prayer

O Lord, please help us to find the joy, forgiveness, and the liberation in you! Let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

1. Joy of Liberation!

Generally speaking, I will follow the lectionary for the worship and for my message. The lectionary is a pre-selected collection of scripture readings from the Bible that can be used for worship. Usually, it has four Scripture Readings: one from the Old Testament; one from Psalms; one from the Apostle Paul’s letters, and one from the Gospels. For my message, I will try to choose one from the Old Testament, and one from the New Testament.

For today’s lectionary, there are two Exodus readings, instead of a Psalms reading. What we read today in Exodus 15 are songs like in Psalms. Moses, Miriam, and the Israelites are singing the songs. Can you guess when they sang? It was right after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, while being pursued by the Pharaoh’s army. It was a great moment of God’s victory and salvation for the Israelites from oppression. After this crossing of the Red Sea, there were not any more pursuers. What the Israelites felt moved to do was to sing and praise the Lord.

Perhaps these songs would be remembered and sung later on. As the song started with the first-person singular, like this, “I will sing to the Lord,” Moses or one of the leading singers sang a line and the others responded antiphonally. They were playing musical instruments

like tambourines. They were moving and dancing. How could they hide their joy? Their enemies were gone—they were no longer oppressed. There was great joy in salvation and liberation!

2. Joy of Forgiveness

The second reading from the Gospel of Matthew 18 is about forgiveness. How many times should we forgive? Jesus said, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Can we do this? Jesus shared a parable of the unforgiving slave. There was a slave who was forgiven by the king. Otherwise, the slave would have had to give up all of his family and his possessions. There must be great joy in this forgiveness. However, what mattered to this slave was not to rejoice in this forgiveness, but to go to his fellow slave and to demand from him what he owed. The slave who was forgiven by the king did not forgive his fellow slave.

3. Ironic, but Realistic

Where is this slave’s joy in forgiveness? Could that joy have been overflowing? Could that forgiveness have been spread around to others? But in the parable, that did not happen. Our Lord broke the vicious cycle of sin with the power and joy of forgiveness. But do we, as Christians, follow that virtuous cycle out of the vicious cycle? Do we forgive others? Do we liberate others?

Unfortunately, the parable of the unforgiving slave is ironic but realistic. The Israelites were liberated from their oppression in Egypt. But when we hear of the issues between the Israelites and Palestine, can we say that the Israelites will liberate Palestine? How about us?

We, as Christians, are forgiven. But can we say that we forgive? Jesus probably already knows how weak we are. All of us like to be forgiven, but we do not like to forgive. In my understanding, Jesus gives us the opportunity for us to forgive again and again. In other words, Jesus gives us a second chance to forgive, a third chance to forgive, a seventh chance, on and on, and until the 490th chance, probably, until we forgive.

3. Continue to Forgive!

To forgive is very difficult. After crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites' complaint to Moses and God was to ask why they were saved from oppression? There were no more songs of joy and liberation like in Exodus 15. They complained again and again about the salvation and the liberation, and said that they would be better off back under the oppression in Egypt.

Sometimes, the children who have suffered under alcoholic or violent parents tend to marry an alcoholic or violent partner. It is very difficult to get out of the vicious cycle of oppression. Somehow, that oppression gets internalized within us not only as perpetrators, but also as victims. It is difficult even for the victims to liberate themselves from this internalization. Probably, that's why it took forty years for the Israelites to journey from Egypt to the promised land, in order to break that internalization and the bad effects of the oppression.

When the King forgave the slave, the king broke the normal relationship between the king and the slave. The king might expect the slaves to regard each other not as fellow slaves, but as brothers and sisters. There is no more slave relationship between them. Can we give up

this slave identity? We are all brothers and sisters. We are children of our Lord, the King.

Then, can we forgive, like the king?

To me, to forgive myself rather than others is very difficult. To embrace myself as a victim of oppression is painful. To get out of that vicious cycle of oppression and unforgiveness as a victim and as an offender is very difficult. Then, I see Jesus Christ on the cross. I just kneel down before Jesus, like the slave in front of the king. And I just pray to our Lord, just like Moses in front of the Red Sea. Forgiveness is what I cannot do, but what God can do through me. I continue to pray, in order to embrace myself as a victim and as a sinner, and to forgive myself. In this broken world, I am a sinner and I am a victim. But I am one of God's people who experience God's salvation and liberation! I am one of God's children who are forgiven. I do not know how many opportunities God will give me to forgive. But I will try to choose to forgive, whenever there is an opportunity. That's because Jesus came to forgive and save me. O Lord, have mercy on me. Have mercy on us, this church, and this world.

Closing Prayer

O Lord, there is your miraculous presence in salvation, liberation, and forgiveness. To forgive ourselves and to forgive others is difficult. But with you, we can do it. As you forgive us, please help us to forgive ourselves and others. In Jesus' name. Amen.