Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
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Sermon: Joseph Megamix
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Genesis 45:3-11, 15
Luke 6:27-38

August 8, 1974: a scowling Richard Nixon sits behind a dark-stained wooden table, before a faded, navy blue curtain with a stack of papers in his hand. I find it interesting that he doesn't use a teleprompter, which had already been in use by politicians for two decades by the 1970s. It's like he needs the papers as a buffer between himself and the audience. On either side of Nixon are flags and microphones; he looks boxed in. He stares out at the country rather somberly; he doesn't smile much, because, well, President Nixon wasn't much the smiling kind, was he? But he is especially solemn this evening because he is delivering his resignation speech, following the Watergate scandal. I bring this breakpoint moment of our country's history up to you today, because I'm especially interested in his apology for his role in Watergate, what you might call a non-apology[1]: "I regret deeply any injuries that may have been done in the course of events that led

[1] Aaron Lazare's analysis of Nixon's and Zoellar's apologies informs this opening section. See *On Apology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 90-96.

to this decision [to resign]" he says.[2] It's an apology, but it's also not really an apology, because it's so conditional. Was anyone hurt, well, injuries "may have been done." Done by whom, you might ask? Nixon never acknowledges that he hurt anyone. He's distancing himself from the offense at the same time that he offers his apology for it.

Of course, it's not just politicians who are famously poor at apology; it's professional golfers too. Fuzzy Zoellar famously gave such a faux-apology for his racist remarks about Tiger Woods during the final round of the 1997 Augusta National, after he said Tiger Woods, whom he called a "little boy," owed his success in Augusta to the tournament serving the golfers fried chicken and collard greens. In front of the cameras of CNN's "Pro Golf Weekly," Fuzzy gave his own non-apology, "It's too bad that something said in jest is turned into something it's not, but I didn't mean anything by it and I'm sorry if it offended anybody. If Tiger is offended by it, I'll apologize to him too."[3] Again, he's only sorry "if it offended anybody." Not sorry for thinking racist tropes are funny, not sorry for demeaning an up-and-coming golfer, Tiger Woods, who went on that weekend to become the first black man to ever to win the Masters. Zoellar was sorry only "if" his racism bothered anyone.

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[2] "Richard Nixon's Resignation Speech." *Youtube.* CBSN. https://youtu.be/3_DrUaJEBtE

[3] Associated Press, "Zoellar Apologies for Woods Comments," *The New York Times*. April 22, 1997. https://nyti.ms/2Nwc7Du

How often do you hear these words in front of television cameras? Has anyone ever given you a conditional apology? I wonder, did you feel compelled to forgive?

Non-apology. Faux-forgiveness. Compulsory reconciliation. A cursory glance might read the Hebrew bible lectionary text today as an example of cheap grace.[4] In the final chapters of the book of Genesis, Joseph is the favorite son of his father Jacob, who gave Joseph a coat of many colors as a token of his affection. But then Joseph is sold by his jealous brothers into slavery to Egypt, where he then suffers a roller-coaster of rises and falls, until he finds favor with Pharaoh through his gift from God of dream interpretation. Pharaoh has a series of dreams that Joseph correctly interprets as warnings by God of 7 years of famine coming to the land. Recognizing his gift, Pharaoh makes Joseph a high official in Egypt, where he helps the country prepare for the coming famine, storing up grain before the years of hunger.

By the time we get to the lectionary text, the tables have turned. It's the middle of the famine, and the brothers who sold Joseph into slavery come to him desperately in need of food, and Joseph appears, well, *unbelievably* gracious. He

[4] I am thankful to Stacey Simpson Duke's helpful commentary in picking up the complex theme of forgiveness in this lectionary text. See Joel B. Green et. al (Eds). *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Vol. 1*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 257-258.

sits before them, high in his chair, where he commands millions, second only to Pharaoh, and he looks down at the brothers who years ago sold him into slavery, and Joseph exclaims, "It was not you who sent me to Egypt, but God…God has made me lord of all Egypt." And there it is, cheap grace; the brothers don't even need to give a non-apology. Joseph "kissed all his brothers and wept upon them."

Have you ever been asked to forgive before you were ready? Before you thought the offender really deserved it? Before you felt that justice was done? Before you felt safe after the offender violated your trust? Churches love to talk about forgiveness; we can make forgiveness seem easy, even obligatory. Have you ever felt guilty when you couldn't forgive? If we've just skimmed the surface of our Bibles, we might make the mistake of holding forgiveness up too highly, too ideally; we've asked victims, survivors, persecuted groups, people who have been wronged to forgive and forget without ever asking what reconciliation really looks like, without asking what forgiveness really means or costs.

They swam in the sunlight, unencumbered, in freedom, and with joy. Marjorie and Marcus, friends and fellow graduate students at Stanford, visit the Cape Coast Castle on the shores of Ghana in the last chapter of Yaa Gyasi's haunting novel *Homegoing.* In the final scene of the book, the two run headlong into the ocean, meeting one another amongst the crash of the waves. Gyasi narrates, "[Marcus] closed his eyes and walked in until the water met his calves,

and then he held his breath, started to run. Run underwater. Soon, waves crashed over his head and all around him. Water moved into his nose and stung his eyes. When he finally lifted his head up from the sea to cough, then breathe, he looked out at all the water before him, at the vast expanse of time and space. He could hear Majorie laughing, and soon, he laughed too. When he finally reached her, she was moving just enough to keep her head above water."[5] In this moment, as a reader, you know something that neither of these characters could know. You know this joyful meeting in the sea is actually a reconciliation at the site of a wrong that occurred between their two families, whose repercussions lasted for centuries.

Every chapter of the book tells the story of a different generation of these two families, so the first chapters of the book take place hundreds of years before Marcus and Majorie were born. At the beginning of the book, Marcus's great-great-great-great-great grandmother is captured by an African tribe affiliated with Majorie's great-great-great-great-great grandmother, and this ancestor of Marcus is sold to English colonists; she dies a slave. And her daughter dies a slave. And on and on, until Marcus is born to this African American family who has struggled through the generations to pick themselves up out of slavery and oppression. But that history is lost to time, so Marcus couldn't know that his friend Majorie is the

[5] Yaa Gyasi. *Homegoing* (New York: Vintage Books, 2016), 300.

descendant of that African tribe affiliated with those who captured and sold his family long ago to the English; he couldn't know about how Majorie's own ancestors struggled and grappled for generations in their complicity with the English slave-drivers. That history is also lost, just as countless family histories have vanished in the fog of slavery and imperialism.

Marcus and Majorie swam in the sea. Their joy together was a moment of healing, for a wound they could not fully name or know, for an injustice done between their families hundreds of years ago. The novel, Yaas Gayasi's *Homegoing*, is fiction, but it tells us a deep truth: that reconciliation can remain incomplete for a lifetime, for lifetimes, that the wounds of history take centuries to heal, if they ever heal at all, that our lives are a part of the larger tapestry of history, where the consequences of injustice can last through the ages.

An example: forty-five years after Richard Nixon's resignation, our country is still stuck, perhaps now more than ever, in the toxic politics that he did not begin but from which Nixon certainly benefitted and perpetuated. Twenty years after Tiger Woods won the Masters for the first time, white and black communities in our time are still haunted by the racist stereotypes and images that Fuzzy Zoellar repeated when he mocked Woods in front of the television camera. In the face of such histories, momentary apologies do not count for much. The truth is that our communities have tended to trade the real work of reconciliation for the

momentary relief of cheap grace, for apologies we don't really mean, for forgiveness we haven't really earned.

When churches talk about forgiveness, you can always hear echoes of the later verses of Jesus's famous sermon in Luke, can't you? Here he proclaims a radical reorientation to those who hurt us: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." The verses go quickly, one after another, and we have read into them a command by God for those who have been wronged to forgive quickly, to forgive easily, even for offences that haven't been made right.

But the forgiveness that Jesus commands of us here is not meant as an excuse for abusers to get away with their abuse; the command is not meant to sweep histories of injustice under the rug; it's not a call for reconciliation to happen in name only without it actually changing anyone's life. That type of forgiveness can be toxic, can be harmful rather than graceful. Throughout the gospel, Jesus always stands with those who are hurting, with those who are outcast or marginalized. And so, Jesus doesn't call for cheap grace. It's not that easy. Jesus's sermon, in every verse, is a call to a radical reorientation of ourselves to the real and free grace of God. The love of enemies it offers us frees us from hate, from revenge, from grudges, but is not meant to excuse evil or wrong; it is not meant to revictimize the victim. Forgiveness, real reconciliation, individual and

collective, when it is for harms that affect our lives, our communities. . . that takes time; it can take years, or generations, and it takes work.

Joseph struggles in Genesis. The lectionary excerpt gives us only a slice of the story, but things do not go as easily as they seem. The brothers do not just appear before Joseph desperate, hungry and remorseful, and Joseph forgives. When we read the chapters before our reading today, we find that Joseph struggles for years over this decision. The first time the brothers come, he doesn't even reveal to them who he is; he doesn't trust them. Why would he? He sends them away before they ever knew who they were talking to. But things grow worse in their land, and the brothers make the journey a second time to Egypt where there is food. This time, when Joseph gives them supplies and sends them on their way, he sets a trap for them. He plants a silver cup in the bag of the youngest brother, so Joseph can frame him for stealing. When the cup is discovered, Joseph tries to throw this youngest brother into jail, but then another brother begs Joseph to put him in jail instead.

I know, it's a complicated story. It takes pages and pages of Genesis to get through it all, but as you can see, our reading today tells only a brief part of it. It is misleading to think that Joseph forgives on the spot, as if that would be possible, as if that would be righteous. It's only when Joseph sees that his brothers have really changed, when one begs to be put in jail in place of the youngest and most

vulnerable, that Joseph finally reveals to them who he is, that he forgives them, that he makes the statement about God being with him all along.

I'm inclined to think that throughout these chapters, Joseph struggles, that a part of him never wanted his brothers to know who he was, or perhaps he didn't feel safe to reveal his true identity; maybe he was tempted to revenge and actually wanted to throw them in jail just like they threw him into slavery. However you read this story, it is a messy one, as stories and histories of reconciliation always are.

But its conclusion rings true: that reconciliation takes time and effort, and that God stands with those who are harmed. And from that place, God calls us, as individuals, as a community, to do the same. The work of reconciliation is on-going; it is not the place of non-apologies that feel good in the moment; it takes patience; it takes work. In fact, the fruits of our labor, we might not see. If we are lucky, perhaps the generations that follow will. Let us therefore stand in solidarity with the victim, the survivor, the oppressed. Because that is where we will find God. Amen.