

## Proper 19 A

We have three moments in today's Scriptures that speak to judgment and forgiveness. Joseph assured his frightened brothers, who feared his revenge, by saying "Am I in the place of God," meaning, there would be no revenge.

Paul asked the Roman Christians "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?" and says "each of us will be accountable to God."

And Jesus threatens us with punishment if we do not "forgive your brother or sister from the heart."

It would seem that today's theme is clear; we are meant to forgive.

And this is for two big reasons:

We are meant to forgive because we are not God.

And then: We are meant to forgive because we hope to be like God.

I risk confusing you but think that this double point is worth teasing out.

We forgive because we are not God and yet we forgive because we are meant to be like God in forgiveness.

So we are meant to forgive because we are not God;

Joseph recoils from the idea of punishing his brothers; who had thrown him in a pit and sold into slavery because, he says, he does not stand in the place of God.

High though he had risen in Egyptian government, close as he was to Pharaoh, who thought himself a god, Joseph had not forgotten the way of Israel.

The Lord your god is the only God.

You will have none other but him, says the first commandment, that would be revealed some generations later but that Israel already sensed.

So no god named Rameses or Augustus, and no god named Nicholas, Nancy, or Ned.

Perhaps life among the Egyptians had deepened his convictions;

he would have seen their religion, their gods who lusted and changed and seemed like humans.

He saw Pharaoh, who demanded absolute power over everyone and who was addressed as a deity.

All this may have made Joseph a better Israelite;

sure that God was God alone,

different from human beings and demanding absolute fidelity of them.

Life among a people with no great ontological divide between God and humanity may have impressed upon the Hebrew leader how great the divide was.

No, he told his brothers, though you wronged me,

I am not your judge, not your jury, not your executioner.

Because I am not God, because my judgments are small and human, I must forgive.

Paul spoke similarly as he wrote to the Romans, trying to set them up for a rich and good life together,

one that could be destroyed by constant conflict and disputes.

And who also lived in an imperial setting, near a man treated as though he were a god.

Early in the first days of the church, there were already disputes about many things, particularly about which days were right for worship and whether the dietary laws of the Hebrews' covenant would remain in effect.

Paul told them that none of those things mattered enough to give any of them cause to pass judgment on a brother or sister.

We live to the Lord, he writes, and we are accountable to God.

We are not here to be little gods, judging each other, looming over each other.

Letting God be God frees us to be human beings in better relationship, even right relationship with each other.

We won't get very far in relationship, in friendship, in love, if we are quick to judge and unforgiving.

To have a few great friends in life is a great blessing and that is a blessing much more likely to be received if we live with less judgment and more forgiveness.

So we say that judgment is one of God's things, in God's portfolio, not ours.

Judgment is a final thing; think of what courts issue; final orders, definitive judgments, which may be appealed but mostly stand.

They have authority behind them.

They are God's to issue; not ours; we just don't have the authority.

To be sure, we'll never stop evaluating others,

never stop feeling their failures and injustices against us.

But judgment is something we can forbear, shrink back from and should.

Think back to the last time you were really angry with someone who meant a lot to you.

(I bought some socks Friday and the clerk insisted that I take them in a plastic bag, which was irritating; that's not what I mean).

I mean when your sister took advantage of your mother when she was writing her will or your spouse did that thing again that messes everything up.

Do you remember that angry feeling that overcomes you?

The power and destructiveness of it?

How long it take to repair a relationship when such anger has come in?

Those moments of destructive power might remind us of the floods that washed away the sinful world in the time of Noah,

the sea that drowned the Egyptians,

the judgment of God that sent Israel into captivity in Babylon.

We are capable of such judgment and destruction but not entitled to it.

When carried away by our passions, we think ourselves gods, but we are not.

And even God, it seems to many, is not "God" in those senses, on careful reflection.

If Jesus' parable is an allegory in which the landowner stands in the place of God,

we see that God's first move is to forgive, to release even great debts.

The destructive and final judgments remembered in scripture are not God's preference or desire.  
God forgives before God judges.  
So if judgment is in God's hand, not ours,  
God has that hand behind God's metaphorical back, maybe even has set judgment on a table in  
the corner of God's metaphorical heavenly chamber,  
with both hands full of forgiveness,  
ready to embrace those who will repent.  
And if we will be like God, we are to be people of forgiveness as well,  
to prefer it to judgment,  
as God seems to prefer forgiveness to judgment whenever God can.

There is one who has given us a picture of what humanity,  
in perfect communion with God can be like, Jesus Christ, from whom forgiveness flows.  
Jesus is indeed God and human, and by him the possibilities of a restored humanity are revealed.  
If that man in whom the fullness of divinity was pleased to dwell  
was quick to eat with sinners and tax collectors and women of poor reputation,  
if he spoke words of peace to his persecutors,  
if he forgave those who judged him,  
then the way forward for us is surely known.  
It is to remember that we are not gods but humans,  
And that humans, made new in Jesus,  
can grow in the way of forgiveness that God has revealed in him.