

To Forgive
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To Forgive
Genesis 37 and 45

Quite a scripture reading this morning, wouldn't you say?

We're looking at a couple chapters from the Joseph story which is a long, long story of what happens with Joseph, his father, and his brothers. We've missed some of the background, some of the suspense, but we hear a little bit of the lead-up to what happens to Joseph. How he is sold into slavery. And then we hear the final, great reveal when Joseph un.masks himself to his brothers.

The story of Joseph actually begins far earlier in Genesis, even before his own conception. It begins with the story of Rachel and Leah, two sisters married to the same man, Jacob, and both miserable in this arrangement. One cannot have children but is beautiful and beloved. One is can have children but is pushed aside and not wanted. Each strives to have children like a competition until there are twelve sons in all (which later become the twelve tribes of Israel). But the favored one is Joseph.

Joseph is born to Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel, and becomes Jacob's favorite child because he is the child of Jacob's old age. And as the favorite he receives a coat with long sleeves, sometimes called the coat of many colors, the technicolor dreamcoat. It is the sign of the favored son. And Joseph's brothers are jealous.

I don't know how many of you grew up with siblings but it seems to be a typical sibling pastime to figure out who is the best-loved child. Who does Mom love best? Who is Dad's favorite? And there is, of course, jealousy. It is not a hard story for us to understand on that level.

But then things get ugly. The brothers plot to kill Joseph. But in the end they decide to just sell him into slavery instead for twenty pieces of silver. (Hmmm, that twenty pieces of silver will come up again at the end of Lent as well as the price that Judas gets for betraying Jesus.)

So the brothers carry this secret for a long time. Years go by. Joseph has all kinds of adventures in Egypt. He is a slave. He goes to prison. Pharaoh's wife tries to seduce him. He is a great dream interpreter. He rises high in Pharaoh's court and is almost like Pharaoh's right hand man.

He becomes powerful because he predicts the famine in Egypt and he has the Egyptians prepare. As a result the brothers show up, back in Egypt, looking for food. And here we have today, Joseph is faced with the brothers who had forsaken him, betrayed him, stolen his home, his parents, his life with his family. Here they are, standing before him. What shall he do?

Here we are testing the limits of forgiveness.

Lewis Smedes has a wonderful book entitled "Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve." He mentions four stages of forgiveness: Hurt, Hate, Healing and Coming Together. I'd say Joseph is pretty clear on the hurt and the hate. I think we all might be, too.

Joseph struggles with these emotions. Now here he is face to face with his brothers. But he's had a lot of years to struggle with this, to chew on this, to stew on this. It's not like Joseph

goes from being thrown into a pit and sold into slavery to forgiveness overnight. It does not happen easily. Years have passed for Joseph to think about what has happened. When his brothers first appear, Joseph is terribly cruel to them and sets them up to look like thieves and experience all sort of shenanigans while they do not recognize him. Joseph is very human.

Forgiveness for Joseph takes time. It's a struggle. And when we are working on forgiveness, we need to realize it takes time for us, too. You can't force forgiveness. We, like Joseph, may go through a vengeful phase. That doesn't make the desire, or the acting out of vengeance right, but it is human, and it doesn't mean that we will never be able to reach a point of forgiveness. Because we have to move through it: hurt, hate, healing, coming together.

When I was in elementary school I had a good friend named Laurie and I would ride my bike over to her house to play. And as kids do, we would end up in some squabble about something and I would huff off and ride my bike home. Then I would wonder what would happen the next day at school. Now I would get there and Laurie would pretend nothing had happened. Which on the one hand it was great. We could just go on being friends.

But on the other hand it wasn't. Because we never actually dealt with what we had fought about or got angry about. We never got to the point of healing and forgiveness and coming back together in the same way. It always just hung in the air.

So what do we do as people of faith, people following Jesus in this difficult season of Lent as we think about forgiveness?

Back to our story. What does Joseph do? Well, first thing, he tells everyone else to leave the room and closes the doors. Then, he starts crying. He cries so loudly, in fact, that the Egyptians he put outside so that they could not witness this, can hear him all the same. Joseph has held onto his pain for so long that once he began to cry "all of the Egyptians" heard him. Imagine the emotion pouring out of this man. This pouring out of twenty, thirty years of anguish. He wants to know if his father is even still alive.

As for the brothers, well, they stand in silence. Can you imagine being one of those brothers? Here you are standing in front of the second most powerful man in Egypt begging for food. And that man also happens to be your brother that you sold into slavery and almost killed. Difficult.

Now our relationship with God is integral to forgiveness. But forgiveness does not necessitate our saying everything is okay. Because it is not "okay." When we hurt one another, damage relationships, murder, or abuse one another, these things are horribly wrong. Forgiving does not mean we accept that act. It does not mean we have to accept the abuse or accept the wrong. But forgiveness can mean that we accept God's infinite power, which can hold and transform even the most awful acts that we can experience. Forgiving another person means we free ourselves from them, we free ourselves from that act, we free ourselves from a past that we cannot change.

Forgiveness is hard. Very hard. There is an interesting thing called the Forgiveness Project founded by a journalist in 2004 by Marina Cantacuzino. And it helps people examine things that have happened in their lives, terrible things including genocide, family shootings, and helps them come to terms with unresolved grievances.

There's a website and you can read the stories of people who have come through this very difficult process of forgiveness. And what it means to turn from hate to humanization and alternatives to cycles of crime, violence and injustice.

Because in this Joseph story how does it all start? It all starts because Jacob is forced to marry two sisters. He is tricked into it. And they all live in this horrible relationship together, this horrible triangle. That gets passed down to this competition of who can have the most kids. And that gets passed down to the youngest son being favored because he is the son of the beloved wife. Generation to generation. What will happen now that Joseph has all his brothers in his power, in this room?

He decides to forgive. He decides, looking at them, to see a greater plan in this. That God has preserved this family because Joseph is in Egypt and he has preserved Egypt from famine so his family can come there for food.

Notice that the brothers say nothing. They are shocked. They are terrified; they are speechless. Can this be true? Can this be real? And, if so, then what? It is the "then what" that is really difficult in forgiveness.

Because to offer forgiveness we have to know what it really is. Forgiveness essentially is the cancelling of a debt. Someone has wronged us. There are consequences for those wrongs or vengeance that we'd like to have for those wrongs. But we decided to cancel that debt. But somebody has to pay it.

Think about it. You have a mortgage for your house. You owe a certain amount of money. What happens if the bank forgives the debt? Does the money go away? No. The bank pays the money, right? There is a cost.

And in forgiveness there is a cost, too. If we choose to forgive, we are forgiving the debt. Forgiving that person for what they have done to us. Whether emotional, physical, monetary. We are forgiving it. We can freely offer forgiveness, but it is not free. That is why it is so hard. Because if you truly forgive something, it costs you. But the cost of not forgiving is a lot higher.

Forgiveness requires some things of us. It requires that we see the person who harmed us as a person, a person doing the best they can, just like we are. As a person who is fallible and flawed just as we are. A person who makes mistakes just like we do. We can't call them the "other" because they are us. It is the first step in forgiveness. Because when you humanize your adversary, you humanize the person who has hurt you, it is much, much harder to hold on to hate.

Forgiveness it takes time. And it can't be easy like it was with my friend from third grade. It's not a matter of just pretending it didn't happen. Forgiveness requires walking us through.

It's also important to note that no one can demand forgiveness from you. I especially want to point this out because many folks who experience sexual violence and sexual abuse, their abusers come to them and demand that they forgive them. No one can demand forgiveness from you. It must be freely offered from yourself.

I do not believe you have to forgive. For some of us, we cannot get there. For some wrongs we cannot get there. But I believe in a just and forgiving and healing God and ultimately that can be placed in God's hands.

However, I do know that if you do forgive, it frees you. Because holding onto hate like Anne Lamott would say is like taking rat poison yourself and waiting for the other person to die. Forgiveness frees you, it frees me, to live a life so much more full, so much more open, so much less baggage to carry around. Forgiveness is such a good thing to work on during Lent

as we are trying to empty ourselves out, to clear a way within ourselves, in this reflective season.

It takes time.

It takes prayer.

It takes trust. Trust in God, trust in ourselves.

A pastor of mine said, "Hurt and disappointment is like swallowing a cockle-burr with its stickers continuing to jab and hurt us on the inside. It's such an insult to the stomach -- you can neither cough it up. To get rid of it all you can do is "metabolize" it -- digest it -- process it." That's the way it works with hurt, with those who have betrayed us, with those who have hurt us.

For Joseph, he had to metabolize. He had twenty or thirty years to do it. But he had a lot of metabolizing to do. So maybe grace, what we receive from God, what we say we are as a community of faith, can be the "milk of magnesia" that helps protect us as we work on it.

So I say to you, I invite you, in this Lenten season, to the practice of forgiveness. It is not easy. It is hard. It is not permission for someone to hurt you. It does not mean you agree to what someone has done to you. It is an act of grace that frees you and ultimately may free the person you forgive from these endless cycles of vengeance and hurt and anxiety.

You might not be ready today. You might not be ready at the end of this season of Lent. But today we can each make a start. I invite you, as Joseph did, to test your limits of forgiveness.

God will be there in the midst. And you too can be set free. Thanks be to God, amen.

Passages from Genesis 37 and 45 (NRSV)

This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph was shepherding the flock with his brothers and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Jacob loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

One day Joseph's brothers saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." They threw him in a pit and took his long robe. However, when some Midianite traders passed by, the brothers lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And the traders took Joseph to Egypt.

Years later Joseph's brothers came to Egypt because there was famine in the land. They stood before Joseph to ask for food, for he was now an advisor to Pharaoh, but they did not recognize him.

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer.

He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. Hurry and bring my father down here." Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.