

## **Forgiveness and Healing**

Genesis 45:1-15; Matthew 15:21-28

August 17, 2008; Tim Devine

St. Paul's United Church of Christ; Seattle, Washington

*“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.”*

These words conclude the story today from the Book of Genesis. Last week we heard the beginning of this episode, when Joseph was sold into slavery by these very same brothers. They also tricked their father Jacob into believing that Joseph was killed by a wild animal, by killing a goat and smearing Joseph's special “coat of many colors” with its blood.

Quite a bit of time has passed. Joseph has been in Egypt and has been lucky. His dreams continued and they were even reported to the Pharaoh. Pharaoh was also having dreams and was desperate to know what they meant. Joseph was summoned to listen and was able to interpret them correctly. On a practical level, this was an important accomplishment, because there was a famine coming. Because of Joseph's interpretation and warning there was enough food in Egypt throughout the seven years of hunger.

Back in Canaan, however, things weren't going so well. The famine was hitting hard. Jacob heard that there was food in Egypt so he sent his sons there to buy some for the extended family and clan. So they did. Joseph, now high up in the government of Pharaoh, happened to be the “civil servant” that received this request. Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. It would be hard for them to imagine that after selling someone as a slave that he could end up high in the Egyptian government.

In short, the food is purchased. The brothers are thankful. And they set out on their way home. Joseph, however, isn't quite finished. He has a silver cup placed in the belongings of the next youngest brother, Benjamin. After the brothers are on their journey home, they are intercepted by an Egyptian steward under orders from Joseph to look for a “stolen silver cup.” And there it is, in Benjamin's bag. All the brothers are hauled back and they are being interviewed by Joseph. He says that the one who stole the cup – seemingly Benjamin – must remain in Egypt and become his slave.

At this point the grief and guilt about what they had done to Joseph so long ago finally catches up with the brothers. They are remorseful and Judah offers to be the needed slave in palace of Benjamin. They all agree that it would break their father's heart if something happened to Benjamin, the next youngest brother (after Joseph). It is at this moment when Joseph falls apart and where our reading for today begins. He is overcome with all sorts of emotions and tells his brothers who he really is. They are forgiven.

They are invited to live in Egypt for the duration of the famine. And Jacob, in his old age, is reunited with his (favorite) son.

So Joseph forgives his brothers. It echoes a scene from a generation earlier when Esau forgave his brother (and Joseph's father) Jacob. Both are powerful scenes. And these are example of what we hear in the coming words of Jesus – that we are to forgive – even to love our enemies. It is a big task. And forgiveness is not a simple thing. It is complex and does not mean a total wiping the slate clean.

Part of where we all get stuck with forgiveness is that we usually stop with only half of the concept – the part about us forgiving others. But in the prayer of Jesus that we recite every week, there are two parts to forgiveness.

*“And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”*

We are asking for God's forgiveness. But, maybe even harder, is the question of who might we need to ask for forgiveness. Who have we hurt? Ignored? Tricked? Cheated?

While Mick offers us a musical interlude, let us all take a moment and reflect on what we have done and left undone, who has been hurt, and to whom do we need to ask and seek forgiveness for ourselves?

\* \* \*

It is also important to say a few words about what forgiveness is not. It is not being a doormat. It isn't about excusing abusive behavior. It isn't about forgetting boundaries.

In the Biblical passage, Joseph has some unhelpful words for us:

*“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 ploughing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; who has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.”*

This is more than the “Oh, don't worry about it” words that we all have given in response to an apology. No. Joseph has moved from the God works in mysterious ways camp to one where he sees that God gave him suffering for the greater good. Who ultimately knows? But words like these have been given over the years to keep people in unsafe and abusive situations. “Stay in the marriage – think of the children,” for example. The Bible should not ever be used to continue to provide harm to anyone. Joseph may have said these words because he was in a position of power and it had been a long time since he had experienced life as a victim.

Forgiveness isn't some milk toast or spineless response to life. It is engaged. It is often a protest. It is non-violent. And it never buries the truth. The image of forgiveness that I have held for over twenty five years is of 75 year old Ruth Nelson, walking into a group of Israeli soldiers who were holding down a couple of Palestinian children by their hair. A couple of us witnessed this from the grounds of the Quaker meetinghouse, and we overheard her say to the soldiers (themselves not looking a day over eighteen): "I know these children. They are not who you are looking for. You can do the right thing here. In the meantime, I'm going into the meetinghouse to pray for you."

Maybe one more attribute of forgiveness is bravery.

In the Gospel of Mark there is a dialogue between Jesus and a Canaanite woman who is pleading for the health of her daughter. Maybe Jesus is simply having a bad day, but he calls her a dog – which in that time and place is not complimentary. Whether she just wears him down, or maybe he realizes that she is right and he is wrong. But he changes. He opens his ministry from this point on to everyone. And he starts with her and her daughter. If there was ever a time Jesus should ask for forgiveness, I think this is it. But he doesn't in the way that the modern world (or I) would have it. But he compliments her on her faith. He heals her daughter. And his message and ministry are forever different – and more inclusive – because of this encounter.

Forgiveness and healing. They are complicated and they are interwoven. However we can manage to be engaged in forgiveness, it is an exercise that can only help us to be even better engaged in the world in ways that avoid being petty or angry or fearful or vengeful. When we can let go of those things, as best as we are able, we can let go of what can make our hearts hard and our lives bitter. And, like Ruth Nelson, forgiveness can speak the truth and let go of what is so toxic.

And finally, we can't legislate forgiveness like we can't legislate healing. When these gifts do come they come at their own time and place, and often unexpectedly. We SO want to make the decisions for God. But God is God, and rather than simply listening to our demands, God offers us grace and love and forgiveness when we take the time to acknowledge our own sins rather than only focus on the ones of others. We are reminded of this every week when we say:

*"And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."*

Amen.

## **Genesis 45:1-15**

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 ploughing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; who has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there – since there are five more years of famine to come – so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.’ And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. 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.

## **Matthew 15:21-28**

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.