

From Blame to Compassion

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February 20, 2022. The sermon today, on our reading from Genesis about Joseph and his brothers who sold him into slavery, is about forgiveness, of ourselves and others.

Readings: [Genesis 45:3-11, 15](#), [Luke 6:27-38](#)

*** Transcript ***

Joseph's brothers did him wrong. There's no question about that. The choice they made out of jealousy, resentment, annoyance, vengeance, has no excuse. And no matter how arrogant and presumptuous Joseph was as a young man, no matter how unfair Jacob's favoritism of his younger son, there is no excuse for what Joseph's brothers did. And the damage they did was significant. For years, Joseph lived in slavery. He endured physical hardship and even abuse, false accusations by Potiphar's wife, ridicule for the gift of dream interpretation that God had given him. And Jacob, Joseph's father, lived all those years thinking that his beloved son was dead.

Ultimately, Joseph's fortune turns around. Pharaoh comes to believe him, and not only releases him from prison, and sets him free from slavery, but puts him in charge of guiding the whole country through the famine that had come over the land. By the time Joseph's brothers come to him desperately seeking food they will need to survive the famine, Joseph has forgiven them for what they did — sort of, anyway. We aren't told how that happens for Joseph. Maybe it was the time that had passed since his brothers sold him. Maybe it was because the physical slavery and the hardship that had resulted from what his brothers did had ended. Maybe it was the great position of power and privilege that he found himself in. One way or another, Joseph has been set free not only from his physical prison, but from the emotional prison of resentment and anger. Truly, a miracle has happened.

Forgiveness is not an easy thing. If it were, the Bible would not need to include so many stories about it, such as Joseph's story today, and Jesus would not have continually taught things like we hear in our gospel today: "Love your enemies, be good to those who hate you." If forgiveness was something we could just choose once and for all and be done, there would be no need to talk about it, right? But it is hard. And there's much to learn from what scriptures share about how to respond when we are wounded.

But this time through these readings what caught my attention was not only Joseph and his ability to forgive, but his brothers who had done him so much harm. Because we've all been there, too.

Some years ago, I did something that hurt someone else. It wasn't the first time, and it won't be the last — I am human after all — but this particular time felt epic. I didn't intend to hurt the other person. I didn't even realize it at the time. But when it was over, harm had been done. The kind of harm that brings heat to the cheeks and a rock in the gut, and the desire to never show myself in public again — at least not if that person was involved.

This is, perhaps, some of what Joseph's brothers were feeling, when they realized that the very person they stood before as they asked for food in the famine was the brother whom they had sold into slavery years before. Our translation says "dismayed" but the Hebrew is perhaps a little closer to the mark: disturbed, alarmed, anxious, terrified.

For years, they had agreed amongst themselves to never tell anyone what they had done, and to that day even their father didn't know that Joseph, the favored son, was still alive. For years, they had been silent about the horrible harm. The shame they felt had bound them in fear and blame, separated them from each other, and from everyone else.

To go back to Joseph for a moment, he didn't immediately leap to forgiveness. In the chapters right before today's story, Joseph actually seemed to delight in tormenting his tormentors for a time, although they didn't yet recognize him, accusing them of stealing and threatening them with imprisonment and starvation. It is only after seeing his eldest brother willingly sacrificing himself for the youngest that he relents. And Joseph wept, bitterly and loudly, before perhaps choking out the words, "I am Joseph. I'm your brother. Is my father still alive?" Forgiveness doesn't come easy but Joseph does it, with God's help.

And now here his brothers were, asking the one they had betrayed to the point of death to save their lives. Disturbed, alarmed, anxious, terrified.

And as we imagine ourselves in their shoes, perhaps we can see that it is hard to forgive, but it is also hard to be forgiven. They have over the years never told anyone what they did to Joseph, never went to their father begging forgiveness, never went to seek the brother they had sold. But still, the transformation was happening. And when it came down to a choice between repeating the harm they had done or giving themselves up in slavery, the eldest brother offers himself up. He can't do this to another brother. He can't grieve his father a second time. The selfishness of the past has become courage and compassion.

This seems almost miraculous, doesn't it? Joseph, sold into slavery and abused, imprisoned for years, face to face with the brothers who had betrayed him. Somehow, the brothers have been changed from what they were the day they took the gold. And somehow, Joseph, weeping, moves past his own resentment to forgiveness. It seems impossible, doesn't it?

Fortunately, it is precisely where we fall short that God steps in. And as Joseph's brothers stare at him, speechless in the shame they still feel, Joseph tells them that it is God who has brought the healing they are experiencing. Let's be clear: God did not send Joseph into slavery to save people from famine — God does not work that way. Joseph's brothers did the selling, and as the scales of years of fear, blame, and disconnection from his family fall from his heart, Joseph can see with courage and compassion instead, and say to his brothers that God took that harm and transformed it for a good none of them could have imagined.

And as the scales of years of fear, blame, and disconnection fall from the brothers' eyes, they understand fully the harm they have done, and recognize the courage and compassion that has transformed not only Joseph, but themselves as well.

Forgiveness is not easy, and there are times when the harm done has been so great that boundaries and distance and even separation are necessary for healing and wholeness to take place. Forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same thing. But whether reconciliation is possible or not, miracles of courage, compassion, and connection happen every day, just as they did for Joseph and his brothers. It takes time and patience. But with God, it is possible.

We are, in our humanity, people who mess up often, who hurt one another, who fail to live in the love of the God who made us for love. We can all be bound up in the shame we feel and feel that we will

never be free. And we are, in our humanity, beloved children of God who continue to grow and experience the miracles of community, forgiveness, and healing that God has for us.

Joseph's brothers did him wrong, no question. But when it comes to forgiveness, of ourselves and others, God never gives up — not on them, not on Joseph, and not on us.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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