

Pastor's Message – 8/16/2020
Genesis 45:1-15

I still remember, years ago now, an incident in my family which has connections with our Bible passage from Genesis today. I had received a text from one of my sisters stating that our father “decided” to get a cat and asking who would be willing to contribute toward the security deposit in his apartment building for a cat? If you knew my father, you would have been as surprised as I was to hear that my father wanted a cat. However, I offered to contribute \$50 toward the \$500 deposit.

Not long after that, he called to *thank* me for supporting his desire for a cat. But during the course of our conversation, he relayed to me that he didn't really want a cat, and didn't know how to tell my sisters he didn't want a cat. I offered to share his decision and, as much as a cat might be good for him to help with loneliness, my brother said he understood. The original mover and shaker for the cat idea may have had hurt feelings.

This is not unusual in families. Hurt feelings or grudges can surface from squabbles ranging from disappointments to poorly chosen words or actions or inheritance disagreements or favoritism or any number of things that can cause hurt feelings.

You probably aren't surprised that biblical families are not immune from such difficulties. We've already studied and reflected and prayed on some difficulties in the first families of the Bible: Abraham and Sarah and Hagar and Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau. If those first families of the Bible had trouble getting along, is it any wonder that families of today can have troubles getting along.

The Joseph story that we heard today is often read as an easy narrative of forgiveness, as if Joseph is ready and willing to forgive his brothers as soon as he encounters them in Genesis 42 after more than twenty years of slavery and imprisonment in Egypt. That is too easy an answer in light of the events that occur from chapter 42 on. Joseph toys with his brothers in Genesis 42-44: he accuses them of being spies, sends them back to retrieve Benjamin, and eventually frames Benjamin for theft and threatens to enslave him. If we think Joseph is a model of eager forgiveness, his actions in these chapters make little sense.

Instead, the text suggests that Joseph's road to forgiveness is long and hard, and he only arrives there after much soul-searching and wrestling with thoughts of anger and revenge. It is no coincidence that Joseph cries several times and behaves erratically throughout Genesis 42-45, where otherwise he shows himself to be a model of self-control. In interacting with his brothers after so many years, Joseph deals with powerful emotions that he struggles to contain.

Joseph's forgiveness, offered in Gen 45:1-15, eventually comes about as a result of three factors. First, he is able to re-tell his past experience, and that of his family, with insight into how God has worked behind the scenes to bring good out of evil (verses 5-8). It is this insight—God has brought about good—that enables Joseph to repay good for evil himself. Second, Joseph focuses on the future rather than on the past. Though he gives an account of the past, his own actions and attitudes are directed toward the future. He states how he will provide for his family and act graciously toward them, bringing them to Egypt so they can all be together (verses 9-13).

The third and final factor is Joseph's recognition of a change within his brothers. Joseph's forgiveness comes in response to Judah's speech in Genesis 44:18-35, where Judah offers to become a slave in Benjamin's place. In doing so, he exemplifies that the brothers have changed. By threatening to enslave Benjamin (and send the brothers home with their money returned to their grain sacks), Joseph has effectively re-created the scene where the brothers sold him into slavery. He has a chance to see whether the brothers will repeat their crime with Benjamin, the other younger sibling whom their father now favors (see Genesis 45:27-29). This time, the brothers choose another path, as Judah's speech makes clear. Rather than abandon his brother, Judah offers to substitute himself so Benjamin can go free. The brothers have changed, and Joseph can no longer treat them as the bad men who sold him and even considered killing him so many years before. At the climax of the Joseph narrative, Joseph responds differently as well, offering words of reconciliation.

Even after all this, however, there are still hints of lingering estrangement. Joseph's brothers hold onto the fear that Joseph will still take revenge after Jacob dies (Genesis 50:15-21). Jacob's sons are not perfect, and stories of family conflict continue to come up among their descendants.

Your family might have had difficulties as well which can result in family members not even speaking to each other for years or decades. So are there any hints from our Joseph story today which might help us to overcome divisions and hurt in families? I think we can see four:

Extend an invitation. Notice that Joseph says to his brothers, "Please, come closer," (45:4). It is hard to make the first move. But we need to remember that the goal of reconciliation is to restore harmony and trust between those who have been offended. If we want to reunite, it may need to begin with an invitation from us to the offender to "come closer."

This is not an invitation to overlook, or dismiss what happened. It's simply a mechanism to close the gap, to begin to see each other as human beings sometimes tortured by emotions and forces beyond our control.

Until the coronavirus made it a global issue, personal space was a cultural issue. Most Americans are uncomfortable when the three-foot bubble is invaded. Now it's a six-foot distance. We don't like people "in our face." We are uncomfortable with people getting too close. Social distancing is one way we can help prevent the spread of disease.

"Come closer" is an invitation to *begin a process*. Come into my space. Understand where I'm coming from. Walk a mile in your brother's or sister's moccasins. We can't begin the journey to reconciliation when we are so far apart, with you sitting on one side of the room, and me on the other side. Come closer. Let's talk.

Forgive. Joseph says, "But don't be upset, and don't be angry with yourselves for selling me to this place." (45:5). Let go of the offender's involvement in your life. Let God deal with those who have caused the estrangement.

In a few weeks, we are going to hear Jesus' expectation that we must forgive "seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:22), He is not suggesting that we keep count. He is implying that there must be no limit to our forgiveness. What makes this such a hard saying is the notion that forgiveness is something we must *do* 77 times. If I must forgive

someone 77 times, it's a sure indication that the offender doesn't get it. The offender is obviously not mending his ways. But that's the point! Forgiveness is not about keeping score! It's not something we do for the other guy or gal; it's something we do for ourselves. Forgiveness is not an action; it is an attitude.

When we understand that forgiveness is not about heroic deeds, but about a heroic attitude, what Jesus says makes perfect sense. You can count actions, but you can't count attitudes. Jesus doesn't keep a forgiveness score.

It would have been easy for Joseph to keep his brothers at arm's length, instead of inviting them to come closer. It would have been easy for him not to forgive. Instead, Joseph says, "Don't be angry with yourselves."

Look for God's fingerprints. "God has sent me ahead of you to keep you and your families alive and to preserve many survivors. So it was God who sent me here," (45:5-8).

This is not to say when evil or distress comes into our life, that God is the author of this mess. It is to suggest that in all of our circumstances, if we look, we can see God at work! As we heard earlier, it is God who make a way when there seems to be no other way.

Be a part of the solution. "I will take care of you there, for there are still five years of famine ahead of us. Otherwise you, your household, and all your animals will starve." (45:11). Joseph was not about to "forgive," and then simply write them off, or blow them off. He enters fully into their circumstances, and he takes action to help them "come closer," to help them find wholeness again.

The story of Joseph is less a "how" to manage anger and more an example of the life-giving results of mercy. This is not to say that those who have been mistreated must instantly run out to offer undeserved leniency to their tormentors. Instead, the story encourages us to place ourselves in the hands of God, the fountain of forgiveness and the source of new life. The most life-giving response to bullies and abusers may be to give them a wide berth and deny them any further destructive influence over our lives.

What Joseph models is *the refusal to allow those evildoers any power over his life*. Instead of permitting the resulting anger to destroy him, thus compounding the damage already done to him, he refuses to allow anger to take over his life and define his actions. He will not lose control of his emotions, but more importantly, he retains control over his life. Anger and fear are not directing his actions. He is able to choose how to respond to his brothers. He puts anger behind him and offers them new life.

To have power and not use it is the ultimate display of power. Jesus could have called 12 legions of angels to His side, He said, but did not. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "If we become violent, there is no difference between us and our oppressors."

Does this mean that every tragedy we experience has a silver lining? That all evil is really good, and that all our suffering is somehow being orchestrated by God?

Not at all.

The world is full of senseless violence, horrifying hatred, and a whole range of actions and attitudes that attempt to thwart the will and desire of God for peace in the world and for harmony between people.

It would be absurd to assert that God is orchestrating all this evil, as the tension of life builds toward some grand and glorious ending. But one thing that both the Old and the

New Testaments teach us is that God has the power to transform human evil into divine good. He used the slavery of Joseph to save a family, and he transformed the death of Jesus into the salvation of the world.

All of our experiences transform us and make us who we are. One of my favorite scenes in the 5th Star Trek movie is a scene in which one of the characters who has the ability to remove pain offers that gift to Captain Kirk, but he refuses. He says he needs his pain – that has pain has made him who he is. Even when the wounds and pain have resulted in scars, we should never ask for a scar to be removed. Joseph didn't, Jesus didn't, and neither should we. But God can create a life in which our wound is transformed into something good, and we are propelled toward new and abundant life.

The question is: HOW? A profound book that I read many years ago was The Wounded Healer, by Henri Nouwen. In his book, Nouwen reflects on what it means to minister in a hurting and alienated society. He recommends prayer, not as a "decoration of life," but as the breath of human existence. A Christian community is a healing community, says Nouwen, not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision.

Take a look at your wounds: physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual. They may be yours individually or scars in your families. How can they be openings or occasions for new visions? Joseph looked at the scar of his sale into slavery, and saw that God had a saving plan for his life and for that of others. Perhaps some abuse you have suffered will enable you to serve people who have been abused; maybe some hurt you have endured will equip you to ease the pain of another; it could be that some loss you have experienced will put you in a powerful position to assist those who are grieving.

By prayerfully reflecting on human scars - instead of ignoring them or wishing them to disappear - we can discover new opportunities for Christian service. Like the plastic surgeon who volunteers his time to help battered women whose faces and bodies have been scarred by abuse. He works hard to restore each woman's beauty. Even if he falls short, he transforms the scar and renders some emotional healing. Not all scars can go away, but most can be transformed.

The greatest transformer of scars is, of course, the Divine Physician, Jesus the Christ. It is by his wounds that we are healed, and by his sacrificial death that we experience everlasting life. He does not remove our wounds, but builds a spiritual scaffold over them - one that shows us that healing is always a possibility, even when it comes in surprising ways.

Our scars need not be embarrassing. Jesus built a scaffold over our scars.

It's called the cross.

God did not leave the world abandoned to its tendency for self-destruction, but came personally as a Savior to offer the hope and promise of salvation for all those who would embrace and receive His love and forgiveness. He offered us forgiveness and showed the way for us to forgive ourselves and others. God's forgiveness is transformative, changing the world into God's vision for His world. Our forgiveness of others can help to bring about God's kingdom of light and love – a world of forgiveness that has been given as a gift and can grow as we embrace and exercise that gift.