

“FAMILIES AND FORGIVENESS”

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

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Wouldn't you have liked to be a fly on the wall for that meeting and for what came next? Do you remember the story of Joseph and his brothers: how Joseph was his father's favorite, how his father pampered and spoiled him, how Joseph being an arrogant spoiled brat, he confided to his brothers his dreams about them some day bowing down to him, the youngest? Do you remember the brothers' plotting to kill their despised brother, throwing him into a deep dark pit and then coldly sitting down to eat their lunch while their terrified brother was probably screaming his head off just feet away from them (the kind of biblical specificity I love). The brothers finally backed off of killing Joseph, and instead sold him to a traveling caravan for 20 pieces of silver, another nice piece of biblical detail. Joseph goes on to become head of Pharaoh's household in Egypt, his dreams warning the Egyptians that after seven good years there would be seven years of famine. The Egyptians stored up their grain in the good years, and Joseph who saved them became second in power only to Pharaoh himself.

Meanwhile, back in Canaan, the brothers had lived for years with what they had done and the lies they told to their father. They took a trip to Egypt because they heard there was grain there, and came face to face with their long lost brother who recognized them, though they did not recognize him. Being human, Joseph tortured his brothers a little: accused them of being spies, threw them in jail, treated them at first roughly and imperiously, then finally, by some internal process, came to the decision that family and relationship were more important than past injuries or payback, and in this morning's lesson, he unmasks himself to his brothers, falls on their necks, and weeps. He forgives them after close to 20 years.

But there the detail ends. We don't get to see the brothers' response, what it was like for them to talk with the brother whose memory had probably haunted them all those long years past. We don't know how it goes for them when they return home and tell their elderly father that the son he has grieved as dead for so many years is really alive, and oh yes, he ended up in Egypt because we sold him into slavery. We don't know whether father Israel, once named Jacob, ever understood that this whole sequence of events was set in motion partly because of his unwise and uneven paternal devotion. There's lots left unsaid, unknown in this story—although our curious selves might want to find out. What we do know is this: that a man named Joseph, after years of separation and estrangement that must have affected not only Joseph's life, but all the household of Israel, a man named Joseph chose forgiveness and reconciliation over alienation and hurt, and the balance of a family was changed.

Two weeks ago, I talked about the Jacob cycle of the book of Genesis, a series of stories about one man's coming to terms with himself. In this last story cycle of Genesis, the Joseph cycle, we deal with family—the good and the bad, the certainty and the uncertainty of them. Here we have ties of affection and respect, love and duty. Here also we have family members making mistakes, behaving badly, hurting each other, hurting themselves in the process. Who here is to blame? In part, everyone. That's the first genius of this story. When we get to the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation, there's no one who doesn't need to learn both to forgive and to be forgiven. That's the way it was in Joseph's family; and so it is for us as well.

They are hard lessons for most of us to learn: forgiving and letting ourselves be forgiven. I'm not sure which is harder sometimes. When we have done wrong, our emotions mix and tangle: guilt, remorse, anger at ourselves that sometimes we just have to turn outward. It's difficult to admit that we have done wrong and that we are sorry. We paw at the ground, or stare at our feet, and mumble out a grumpy apology not much differently than we did when we were children and our mothers forced us to apologize to our siblings for bashing them over their heads, while in our minds, we were still arguing with ourselves over whether they deserved the bashing! We don't want to be or do wrong; and the person made most crazy by our misdeeds is usually ourselves. Often we get so good at beating ourselves up, so lost in our unsavory stew of emotion, that even when the one we have offended lets us off the hook, forgives us and moves on, we can't do the same for ourselves.

The road to forgiveness is equally treacherous. There's an odd kind of luxury in wrapping ourselves in truly righteous indignation and refusing to let it loose. Despite the fact that separation makes us miserable, despite knowing often that the lines of right and wrong are not as clean as we would make them, still we hold fast to our anger, and will not put it from us.

I think that sometimes we hold back from forgiveness because we believe that forgiving is the same as saying that an injury doesn't matter, and we don't want to say that. But forgiveness in biblical terms is not about what matters and doesn't matter. It's about the choice to move forward in relationship despite what has gone before. Forgiving is not the same as forgetting, and when an injury is substantial, forgiving does not mean that a relationship goes back to the place it was before, unchanged. The covenant of forgiveness is to start forward from this new place we find ourselves and see what relationship is possible from here.

But what happens when we refuse either to forgive or to let ourselves be forgiven? In the Joseph story the result is staring at one's brothers across the room as complete strangers, the sins of the past creating distance upon distance until you cannot even recognize each other.

Maybe that's what finally got to Joseph, that he knew that despite the wrong that had been done to him, unless he reached out to his brothers and forgave them, he would lose them forever, and in losing them, he would lose a substantial part of himself. He would be solely Joseph of Egypt, Pharaoh's manager, cut off forever from the one-time spoiled dreamer who was one of the sons of Israel. And of a moment, he took a chance, and said to them, "I am Joseph, your brother. Do not be distressed or angry about what you did to me, for out of it, God has created good for me and for many." And he invited his brothers back into his life, and the last thing we know is that they began to talk.

Again, wouldn't you like to be a fly on the wall? What do you say to your brother after all that anger and all that guilt and all that estrangement? What do the brothers say to their father when they go back to Canaan? This is not a sentimental Hallmark ending. There's still a lot of healing to be done in this family, but whatever else happens, Joseph made a choice. He took a moment offered, and he used it to make a beginning to life and relationship restored.

During my college years, I had a friend who grew up in a small town in the South. Her father was one of the town's most prominent citizens until it was discovered that he had embezzled one of his clients'

money and then killed her to cover up his original crime. Later he skipped bail and was tracked down in another state with a woman not his wife. It was awful. The press made Deborah's family's life a living hell for over a year as more and more was disclosed and the story refused to die. Deborah, angry and hurt, disowned her father, didn't speak to him for 17 years. Who could blame her? And then she had her first child, and looking at her father's new grandson, she decided to put the sins of the past away. It would hurt her more, she decided, to go on not forgiving her father than forgiving him. So she packed up her infant son and for the first time signed the visitor's log at the prison where her father was serving a life sentence. Like the Joseph story, this one does not have a "all lived happily ever after" ending. When I saw Deborah two years after that first visit, things were still strained, difficult, left-over anger and betrayal on the one side, guilt and a sense of abandonment on the other. But the balance had changed. Where before there had been nothing but hurt, now the possibility existed for something new.

There are none who can hurt us like family and none who can heal us like family. One of the gifts of family life for most of us is that whatever hurt or misunderstanding has come before, we see these people over and over again. We can't help our lives bumping into each other's. And so there are moments that come to us where we can put away what has gone before, forgive, allow ourselves to be forgiven. There are moments that come where we can choose new life and the hope of restoration. There are no guarantees here. Just because we are ready to put down what is past does not mean that others are. But any movement we make changes the balance. Like in the Joseph story. Like in Deborah's story. Our movement opens possibility, and as we are told over and over again throughout the stories of Genesis: that's where God is found, in the possibilities. Thanks be to God. Amen