

“HAPPY ENDINGS?”
Genesis 45
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Well, in case there was any doubt in your mind, we just walked in on the end of Joseph’s story—and quite a dramatic end it is, with Joseph sobbing loudly enough that all of Pharaoh’s household could hear him from far outside the room from which he had sent them. So let me tell you briefly how we got to this place.

Joseph is the next to youngest son of Jacob, renamed Israel. Joseph is also his father’s favorite son, a fact which his father unfortunately does not try to hide from Joseph’s 10 older brothers, buying Joseph a very costly coat of many colors. Joseph is also a brat with little emotional intelligence. He tells his brothers things like this: “Hey, last night I had a dream where you all bowed down and worshipped me!” How would that go down in your family? Believe it or not, Joseph’s brothers hated him. They plotted to kill him, and only the timely intervention of Reuben, his oldest and “wisest?” brother changed the plot to selling their brother into slavery and telling their father that he had been killed by wild animals. It is an incredibly ugly story of family violence.

Years passed. Joseph ended up a slave in the household of the Pharaoh, and he had another dream: this one of a dreadful famine to come. Through another lengthy chain of circumstances, the word got to Pharaoh, and Joseph became the second most powerful man in Egypt, preparing in advance for the famine, saving the Egyptian people. Meanwhile, Joseph’s family, living in Canaan, victims of the famine, learned there was food to be had in Egypt, and all but the youngest of Joseph’s brothers journeyed there looking to buy grain. Joseph saw them though they did not recognize him, and his first instinct was to deal harshly with them—payback that involved holding one brother hostage until all the other brothers went back to Canaan and brought the youngest brother back with them, leaving their father alone and with the possibility that all of the brothers would be killed as spies. This morning’s scripture reading is the story of Joseph revealing his identity to all his brothers—returned from Canaan to Egypt—and what happens in that encounter. By the way, that was the shortest possible way I could give context to today’s story!

So here we find ourselves at a moment of high drama: a very different Joseph forgiving his brothers the wrong they had done him, telling them that they had been instruments of God’s mercy and grace from the beginning, that God had wanted Joseph to get to Egypt to rise to the position of being able to save the people from the famine. The brothers are able to receive that forgiveness, and we are given a happy ending: a family restored, good coming out of evil, God’s will working through human agency in mysterious ways. This should be an easy text to preach about, right? Wrong.

Let me explain to you why. Out of almost every biblical text, there is more than one sermon that can be preached, various angles from which you can approach the text. The preacher, chooses one—Sermon A—and leaves sermons B, C, and maybe even D for another day, and that’s not a

problem. Yes, you've given an incomplete reading of the text, but no harm is done. This story is different, however.

It is impossible to preach on this text with integrity if you ignore the top story: which is Joseph's extraordinary act of forgiveness towards his brothers, Joseph's ability to suddenly see God's fingerprints all across the canvass of his life, that a wonderful good has occurred in spite of, or maybe even in part because of the evil done to him.

There is such power in forgiveness: both for the forgiver and the forgiven. In one part of this story arc that we didn't hear this morning, it is clear that Joseph's brothers have been pained if not downright tormented by their action of selling their brother into slavery for all these many years. It has weighed on them for at least a decade, maybe more—the time line we are given is not precise. Imagine what that weight has done to their hearts and souls. Though our sins may not be of Joseph's brothers' magnitude, I would guess that there is not one of us here who does not carry in her or his heart some words spoken, some action done that can't be undone, and has never been resolved, that we would give much to be able to correct. To have that weight suddenly lifted, to know oneself truly forgiven, it can be a powerful, profoundly life-changing experience.

And the act of forgiving is equally if not more powerful. The image for that that works best for me is that there is only so much any of us can carry in our hands, right? And if the "hands" of our hearts are full of hurt, betrayal, anger, bitterness—you name it—then we can't pick up anything else. We can't pick up love. We can't pick up joy. We can't pick up peace. We can't pick up laughter: not unless we are willing to forgive—to let go, to put down the hurts that have been done to us and the pain they have caused. When I was a young pastor in Duluth, there was a family in my congregation: a husband, a wife, two children. The husband had an affair. He eventually left his wife and married this other woman, and his first wife was left devastated. She was angry, bitter. She deliberately made everything having to do with custody of the children a misery. Eight years after I left Duluth—that would have been 10 years after the divorce—I went back for a visit and ran into this woman. It was clear within five minutes of conversation with her that in all those years, she had not let go one iota of her pain and anger. The hands of her heart were still full of it, and so she had not been able to move on, to pick up anything new. She was stuck in that same terrible place. And I need to say here forgiveness is not the same as "forgetness." To forgive is not to deny that something painful happened to you. To forgive is to choose to let go of the bitterness, to put it down, so that you have the chance to pick up something better. And when we sincerely try to do that, God can appear in that mix in mysterious and wonderful ways. It's not a formula: you do this, God does that, presto: good result. For good or ill, I don't believe God's grace works like that. But I do believe that when we are willing to put down old pain to reach for new life, God is our partner in the reaching, in the seeking, in the finding, in the making new meaning out of old wounds.

So that's Sermon A, about the power of forgiving and being forgiven, and it has to be spoken about this text. But if that's all that is said, the result of Sermon A can be perceived as shallow, facile, even dangerous. Forgive; let yourself be forgiven; all will be well. So easy to say. Too easy to say. So here's Sermon B, which also needs to be spoken. Joseph was the victim of extreme familial abuse. His brothers sold him as a slave, deliberately sending him into a future

that could so easily have turned out horrific . When Joseph first saw his brothers again years later, his first response was to victimize them, to continue the cycle of violence that had first been perpetrated on him, only now he had the power.

The problem of familial violence is terrifying contemporary. And not just family violence. All sorts of violence. Abuse by strangers. The mother whose child is killed by gang crossfire at age 14. The family of a cyclist who becomes a paraplegic as the result of a drunken driver. Too often, still, the Church with a capital “C” is not only NOT the victims’ advocate in such circumstances, but churches and “nice” Christians are complicit in perpetuating violence by preaching a too easy, too shallow doctrine of forgiveness when what we really want to do is deny the problem or at least push it out of our sight lines. Because it’s messy. Because it’s complicated. Because there is no neat equation of forgiveness, and when it’s supposed to happen, and how it’s supposed to happen, or even what it means for it to happen in horrific or worse, on-going situations.

I remember in the week after September 11th, 2001, a reporter calling me and asking me to explicate the theology of Christian forgiveness as it applied to the perpetrators and victims of terrorism in two sentences or less. I had nothing to say to that reporter.

The stories of Joseph are the last stories in the book of Genesis, the book of our beginnings. At the end of that last story, it is forgiving and being forgiven that bring healing, resolution, wholeness to individuals, a family, the whole tribe. Genesis does not end on that note by accident. I believe in the power of forgiveness. I ultimately believe that until the individuals, families, and tribes of the earth learn to forgive and be forgiven, healing and restoration will be hard to come by. But I also know that the stories of Genesis speak profoundly about the mixedness, the complication, the deep hurt we humans can visit on one another, hurt where the reach to forgiveness may of necessity be slow, may even seem impossible. So my message for today is that always we should try to forgive, not just because it’s the kind and good way to deal with others, but also because it is ultimately healing for us. However, with those we know who have been deeply hurt, the path to forgiveness is not easily clear. So we need to deal compassionately with them, hold them, support them, help them slowly let go so that they might heal and become whole again. It’s not simple. It is not quick. We should never speak of forgiveness too easily. And yet we should never forget it. For forgiveness is the truest, best road to wholeness and restoration. Thanks be to God. Amen.