

“Why Forgive?”
September 17, 2023
Scripture: Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35

The story of Joseph is one many of you are pretty familiar with, I imagine. We just heard the very tail end of his saga, but it begins with an act of violence that not many would recover from easily. When Joseph was a boy he was his father Jacob’s favorite son. Jacob made no secret of that. He shielded Joseph from the hard work the other sons had to do and he showered Joseph with special gifts the others never received. You may remember the colorful coat Jacob gave Joseph that made him look like royalty while his brothers remained dressed as peasants.

Understandably, this created some friction between Joseph and his brothers, most of whom were older. And one day, when he came around bragging about some dream he’d had where they were all bowing to him, something snapped and they took hold of him looking to kill him. They were talked out of killing him by another brother, so instead they sold him off to a traveling caravan of merchants passing through. Then they dipped his precious coat in animal blood and told their father Jacob that he’d been killed. They meant it for evil, just as Joseph says.

But as his adventures unfold he goes from slavery to imprisonment to finding favor with the Pharaoh of Egypt and becoming the overseer of food distribution during a famine that would draw people from all over the region to Egypt for relief. Among them were his brothers, older now and humbled. Not recognizing him they begged for help, bowing down to him just as he had dreamed so long before. But Joseph knows who they are and plays a little trick on them to make them nervous. So when they come back to him, looking for a new place to settle, they’re a little cautious. Did their father really ask Joseph to forgive his brothers with his dying breath? Who knows? It wouldn’t be the first time they’ve lied to save their skins.

But it wasn’t necessary. Joseph had forgiven them already. He only wanted them to be safe, to begin a new life with him there in Egypt. His forgiveness wipes away a lifetime of anger and resentment and hurt. It ushers in a new era for God’s people, a time of prosperity and peace.

Joseph is the model of forgiveness that shows how important it is and why so much of scripture concerns itself with forgiveness. Without forgiveness relationships remain at an impasse; there’s no way to move forward. God is portrayed over and over as forgiving which is necessary considering all we do to incur God’s anger. In the psalm paired with this reading today in our lectionary God is described as “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” We see all those qualities on display in Joseph, who becomes the presence of God for his brothers.

So, that’s one reason why we forgive. We forgive so we can move past a painful history and establish a new foundation for relationships. But it’s not always as easy as this story portrays. One of my favorite books that discusses forgiveness is this one by Lewis B. Smedes called *A Pretty Good Person*. The subtitle says it all: “What it takes to live with courage, gratitude and integrity OR When pretty good is as good as you can be.” A lot of us can relate to

that. We try and try but none of us ever achieves perfection in our relationships with others, pretty good is all we can hope for.

I'm sure I've recommended this book before, but I encourage you to look it up and read it; it's full of wisdom. Smedes has no illusions about circumstances people endure that are hard to forgive. He knows it doesn't always come easily and, I think, that it shouldn't always come easily. He says, "When we forgive we surrender our basic human right to get even with the person who hurt us."

There are some wrongs, though, that are so heinous, so violently harmful that forgiving them is only possible after much treatment and healing. We're hearing today from representatives of the Family Justice Center that works with people trying to escape domestic violence. Forgiveness is not the first step an abused woman needs to take to get to healing. It might come in time, but it can't be forced. In her book *Keeping the Faith*, Marie M. Fortune, a minister who spent her career working with battered women, provides questions and answers for women struggling with abuse. On the topic of forgiveness she encourages it as an important step for healing, but makes the point, "Instead of forgive and forget, you need to forgive and remember." There are some wrongs done that are so damaging that the relationship can never be repaired even if it's possible to forgive. The Church hasn't always been good at recognizing that and it's done a lot of damage as a result.

So, there are nuances to forgiving we need to understand and honor, but it's still important to do. Forgiving is important because the alternative is so much worse. Jesus' parable about the unforgiving servant is full of hyperbole, but it illustrates well just how damaging withholding forgiveness can be for our spirits. He describes a man, a slave, who owes his master an astronomical amount of money. Ten thousand talents is essentially millions of dollars, an amount impossible to repay. When the slave begs for more time, the master does more than that; he forgives him the whole debt. He just wipes it out. It's an amazing gesture of grace. Thinking about this story, I'm struck by the contrast to those in our country who are so incensed at the idea of forgiving student debt. Is it really that scandalous to extend grace to people as a way of helping them move forward? At any rate, the master of this slave chooses grace and forgiveness.

But somehow that act of forgiveness doesn't penetrate the slave's heart. Instead he withholds forgiveness from his fellow slave over a comparatively tiny amount that's owed. The result, of course, is pretty bad; tortured for the rest of his life. Jesus ends with a pretty harsh word of judgment for those who refuse to forgive. As I said, I don't think forgiveness can be forced—we're encouraged to forgive from our heart, as Jesus says—but neglecting even considering it leaves our spirits in a state of agony.

You see, there's no other way to relieve the pain from a hurting memory. As Smedes writes, "When we forgive an ancient wrong, we set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner we set free is us. When we forgive we dance again to the melody of healing. When we forgive we reclaim control of our lives from the slavery of a hurting memory." This is what Joseph does with his brothers. By forgiving them he is free to embrace them and care for them, to reveal God for them. And maybe in the end that's why we forgive. We forgive to free our own spirits so God can be revealed in the world through us. The alternative is a world where God is obscured, is

hidden beneath the pain of our tortured spirits. And that affects everything in our lives, every relationship, every encounter.

So, I encourage you to search your spirits. What hurting memories are torturing you? Can you forgive? It may be someone long gone but whose presence continues to haunt you. It may be someone you see every day. Who do you need to forgive? Not to exonerate them; they may have no idea or even care that they've hurt you. But to free yourself, to end the torture of your spirit. God is seeking to be revealed through you. Don't keep the God in you hidden beneath the pain you carry. Let forgiveness flow; be released from your prison; and let yourself dance to the melody of healing.

Amen