



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY,
THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, FEBRUARY 20, 2022
GENESIS 45:3-11,15; PSALM 37:1-12,41-42;12 CORINTHIANS 15:35-38,42-50; LUKE 6:27-38

THE FLOW OF FORGIVENESS

Genesis 45:3-11,15 [Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, "Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there--since there are five more years of famine to come--so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty." And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.]

In March 2020, when pandemic lockdown started, our three children came home abruptly from college. It was disorienting to them and to Will and me, too. As each of us sought footing in a changing world, we grabbed onto each other - mostly affectionately, but sometimes not so much. The months rolled by and we adapted to working in close quarters, sharing Wi-Fi and protecting COVID bubbles.

It was the most uninterrupted time our family had spent together since the children were in preschool. And sometimes we surprised each other. I realized I needed to let go of my fixed understanding of these dear people and learn anew the three adults with whom we shared a home.

This happened gradually as our son and daughters carved out their own spaces and

navigated the long distance from their friends. I don't know what it was, but something made them want to reflect on their childhoods, to share in a new way what it was like to move away from our California family and put down roots in Seattle. What it was like when Will traveled heavily for work and I juggled a job and seminary. And other times, too. Many of the stories were funny – like how the girls would dance on the kitchen counters when we were gone – and some made my heart ache.

I realized that some of Will's and my choices had caused hurt, despite our deep love and delight in them. I felt guilty and I admit, a little defensive – hadn't I done the best I could? Yet there we were. Some wounds remained and I longed for healing, for forgiveness. The pandemic gave us plenty of time for that.

Our first reading today from Genesis is a critical point in the saga of Joseph and his brothers. It begins when the patriarch Jacob has twelve sons but favors Joseph. This irks Joseph's brothers, so they throw him in a pit and resolve to kill him. As people do. In a moment of cunning, though, brother Judah sells Joseph to Egyptian slave traders instead. Joseph's life in Egypt is a twisting drama of injustice and hardship, but eventually he predicts a coming famine and Pharaoh

rewards him with a top job in his household. As the famine spreads throughout the world, only Egypt has food. In Canaan, Joseph's family is starving, so his brothers go to buy grain from Pharaoh's agent. When they petition Joseph for help, they don't recognize him. But he knows who they are.

Joseph wants to learn who his brothers have become, so he tests them, insisting they leave the other favored child, Benjamin, as payment. The brothers know this will destroy their family, so Judah offers himself to Joseph instead. This moves Joseph and he resolves to forgive them. That is the reconciliation we hear in the Hebrew scriptures today.

Our gospel also speaks of reconciliation as Jesus teaches his disciples the way to live. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Forgive. Forgiveness is so essential to following Jesus that when he teaches them to pray, right after daily bread, what is most essential is the ability to forgive and be forgiven. It's not transactional – if you forgive me, then I forgive you. It is a way of life in which we inhabit both roles; one version of the Lord's Prayer reads, "Let forgiveness flow between us."

What does it mean to offer forgiveness? It's not condoning or forgetting the hurt someone has done, nor is it saying, "we're all good," no need to do your own work of

repentance. No, forgiveness is about freedom.¹ Where we acknowledge the pain and broken trust as well as the cost of holding on to anger and resentment. And we allow the Holy Spirit to heal relationships, grounding them on a deeper and more nuanced understanding of each other's true self. Forgiveness is not an act of will or a decision, but a process that unfolds with the grace of God. It takes time – decades for Joseph.

What does it mean to *seek* forgiveness, though? Often, when we hear the story of Joseph's family, we pay attention to the horrible things the brothers do and Joseph's generosity to them in the end. We put ourselves in Joseph's shoes and ask, "Could I do that?" Today, I want to stand in the brothers' shoes and ask, "Could I do *that*?" Although I've wanted to, I've never thrown anyone into a pit, but none of us are strangers to jealousy and selfishness, to nursing our own hurts while we turn a blind eye to the needs of others.

So, I wonder how Joseph's brothers seek forgiveness. Scripture says, "Joseph kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him." What do they say? After they get over their shock and

relief, do they acknowledge their guilt and remorse?

And then what? After they resettle in Egypt, well cared for by Joseph, do they live differently? Do they let go of comparing the size of his fortune to theirs and praise God for their repaired family bonds? Do they teach their children to measure their own well-being by the freedom and flourishing of their neighbor? Do those children teach their children to open their storehouses of plenty and share with those who are hungry? I want to know that story.

I want to know that story because I think seeking and receiving forgiveness goes far beyond an exchange of words. Joseph forgives his brothers not because they offer an emotional apology but because he sees how they regret the fracture and pain in their family and how they have changed their behavior as a result. At the end of Genesis, the brothers do indeed explicitly ask for forgiveness, but Joseph makes it clear their debt was paid long ago. They were reconciled when they changed the way they lived together, showing that each life mattered.

I want to know that story because I think it is the one we are living today. I am grateful for what my family learned about forgiveness

¹ William A. Meninger, *The Process of Forgiveness*.

during the pandemic. But no one's story is ever only about their nuclear family. As Rev. Linzi said last Sunday, we are all connected. And there are deep wounds in our community and in our country, some of which, like the damage of racism, wealth inequity, and homelessness, have gone untended for a long time.

This week, I attended a virtual conference at Baylor Seminary in Waco, Texas, titled, "Do we want to be healed? Racism in the white church." I am still digesting what I heard and learned, but I want to share one reflection that goes to the heart of seeking forgiveness.

Dr. Catherine Meeks, Robert Jones and others named the human and theological constructs that uphold racism, but they moved quickly to accountability. Mr. Jones said, "White people must stop talking about reconciliation, recognize our absolute connection with each other, and focus on repair of the real financial, physical, and psychological wounds from white supremacy and economic vulnerability. You will know

you are reconciled when your brothers and sisters of color tell you."

Dr. Meeks said plainly that "when people with power hear this, they immediately worry, 'what will I have to give up?' Instead, they must ask, 'what have I already lost in this system of injustice and suffering? What will I gain spiritually from knowing that everyone has a safe home where their children can flourish?' Because we are so interconnected, if we care for others, our own needs will be met."

This community of faith has committed ourselves to accountability through our statement of lament and action. We are on a long journey together, and we pray for God's guidance. So today, when we hear the story of Joseph and his brothers, may we pray that the forgiveness we find in our closest relationships will open our hearts to the wounds of others and accept responsibility for repair. There is more than enough love and safety and grace for all. Amen.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL