

Family Reunion and Forgiveness

Providence of God Series 5

by

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Genesis 45:1-15, 25-28; 50:20-21

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, “Send everyone away from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ²And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³Joseph 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. ⁴Then 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. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶For 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. ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸So 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. ⁹Hurry 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. ¹⁰You 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. ¹¹I 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.' ¹²And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." ¹⁴Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

²⁵So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. ²⁶And they told him, "Joseph is still alive! He is even ruler over all the land of Egypt." He was stunned; he could not believe them. ²⁷But when they told him all the words of Joseph that he had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. ²⁸Israel said, "Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die."

²⁰Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. ²¹So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

“Forgive” is the one little word with which many of us struggle mightily. We all know the deep need to experience forgiveness, and we know how difficult it can be to forgive another who has harmed us. While forgiveness is an essential ingredient to all relationships – human and divine – it is also something that often seems to elude us: to forgive someone else; to accept forgiveness. even to feel forgiven can be a complicated thing of the head and of the heart.

In my thirty-some years of presiding over Funerals and Memorial Services, other than the death of a child, the saddest occasions I remember are when siblings are alienated from one another when they gather to bury a parent. It happens more often than you might think! Wounds that never heal, and grudges held for years.

I imagine all of us can recount a scenario when forgiveness has seemed beyond grasp. Perhaps a person who had responsibility to nurture and support you failed miserably. Or someone said something unforgettably mean, or told a lie that’s never been forgotten and it hangs over the relationship like a heavy cloud. Sometimes promises or vows were made and then broken and resentment is harbored for years. Something is stolen – an intended birthright, a blessing, a dream; or something is violated – a sense of safety, a part of ourselves – whatever the loss, forgiveness can feel impossible. The hesitancy to forgive can come between two individuals; or within a large family; or keep whole cultures of people at a distance.

Following the colossal oppression of people of color by whites in South Africa during the terrible apartheid era, you remember the nation established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I had a friend in my doctoral program at Columbia Seminary named Maake Masanga who served as the commission’s Chaplain. He recounted how hard it was to listen in order to bring past violence and injustice to light, to enable victims to tell their stories of suffering before those who had terrorized them. How hard it was in turn to ask those who had acted violently to express their moral failures and confess their responsibility for inflicting harm.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was ninety years old on Friday, had fought the brutality of apartheid for most of his life. He took the blows and brutality of racism for decades. But after South Africa's black majority gained power, and the opportunity for retribution lay in the hands of people like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. Tutu led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The hearings exposed the horrific details of atrocities, but instead of retaliation he summed up what had to happen saying, "There is no future without forgiveness."¹

That doesn't mean forgiveness comes easily. It doesn't mean that forgiveness ever comes without pain and sacrifice. And more often than not, it is long coming. Desmond Tutu's proclamation that "there is no future without forgiveness," may have not been the instinctive human choice. But it was the divine choice. It was the choice of Joseph in today's scripture. It has been a long time since those sons of Jacob threw their brother Joseph into a pit and then sold him into slavery. The pit was probably just a human-made hole in the ground, but it might as well have been a canyon for all the hatred and jealousy and betrayal that had sunk between them. It has been a long time since Joseph heard his brothers counting out 20 silver coins – the price of his slavery. It has been a long time since Joseph's brother fabricated a tale about his being killed by wild beasts to explain his supposed death to their father. We know that Jacob went into deep depression and grief; the Bible says he would not be consoled by his children. So while Jacob grieves and the brothers settle into a long season of – we don't know what: remorse? relief? guilt? – the plot gives way to a dramatic story about Joseph rising to power in Egypt. In the intervening years, I like to imagine that the wonderment about what may have happened to Joseph plagued those brothers, that their concern for their father's grief and their own sense of guilt grew.

In today's story twenty years have passed from that day to this one. By twists and turns, by dreams and their interpretation, Joseph has risen from slave and prisoner to Pharaoh's right hand man. In the previous chapters,

¹ Desmond Tutu quote from Michael Lindvall, "The Last Tat," First Presbyterian, Ann Arbor, Feb. 18, 2001.

Joseph's brothers, ravaged by the famine in their land, have come to Egypt begging for grain to keep the family back home from starving. They had stood before this man recognizing his power but not his face. He had inquired about their father; he had persuaded them to go home and return with his little brother; he had tested their motives, and today the game is up.

If revenge were in the cards, then this was the opportunity to get even with these brothers. After twenty years of sorrow and homesickness, anger and bitterness, Joseph could have had them struck dead. With a wave of his hand he could have ordered them into slavery. He could have sent them home, empty-handed to face starvation and death. But Joseph turns away from those understandable options, and turns toward his brothers.

How on earth did he have the capacity to forgive those brothers? This is how. When he looked back at his life, over all those painful intervening years since – his brothers had left him for dead, he also saw God at work, using his tragedy to preserve the life of his people, using his exile to prepare a safe place for them. That was justice enough for him. He saw how God had given his future back to him, and he decided to return the favor by giving his brothers a future too. He broke out of the pit they had put him in, by choosing the freedom of forgiveness over the bondage of revenge.

A few years ago one of our Community Forum Speakers was Anthony Ray Hinton. Hinton served three decades on death row in an Alabama prison for a crime he did not commit. His book, *The Sun Does Shine: How I found life and freedom on death row*, is a remarkable testimony to the human spirit. During those long years of loss and suffering, Ray Hinton believed that one day his voice would be heard and he would walk again in freedom. Fifteen years in, his case was picked up by Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative. At one point after an early meeting with Stevenson, Hinton was walked by a guard back to his prison cell and fell to his knees and started praying, "Thank you, God. Thank you for sending Bryan Stevenson. I trust things to happen in your time, so I'm not going to ask why you didn't send him earlier. Take care of him, God, because he's doing your work." He continued praying for the men on death row, for his mother and her health,

for the truth to come out he thanked God for sending him the best lawyer, and thanked God for reopening his case. Then he writes, “I finished my prayer just as the first sob broke loose from my chest. I spent the next two hours on my knees sobbing like a baby. Some nights are just made for crying.”

Sounds a little like Joseph and his brothers sobbing into one another’s necks.

It took another fifteen years to win Ray Hinton’s freedom. When he got out of jail after thirty years, his family was there, the media covered it, Bryan Stevenson was there, as well as his life-long friend who never gave up on him named Lester. Lester had to introduce Ray to a whole new world of cell phones, ATMs, the internet, and GPS systems talking to you while you drive. After some adjustment to life in the sun again, Ray says that folks did not understand how he could possibly stay in Alabama, the state that had taken away thirty years of his life. Since his release, he says, not one prosecutor, or state attorney general or anyone having to do with his conviction has apologized to him. He doubts they ever will. Nonetheless Anthony Ray Hinton says “I forgive them. I made a choice after those first difficult weeks at Lester’s when everything was new and strange and the world didn’t seem to make sense to me. I chose to forgive. I chose to stay vigilant to any signs of anger or hate in my heart. They took thirty years of my life. If I couldn’t forgive, if I couldn’t feel joy, that would be like giving them the rest of my life.”²

Sometimes forgiveness takes a long, long time. Something Ray Hinton learned in an Alabama prison for thirty years, is something Joseph’s story testifies to for all of us: If we trust God to have been with us in the past, even through hidden and mysterious ways, then we can trust God to give us the future. As we, the children of God, attempt to find our way through a maze of experiences and complicated relationships which make up every life, it helps to remember that God has a plan. Sometimes we get wounded, lost and

² Anthony Ray Hinton, *The Sun Does Shine: How I found life and freedom on death row*, p. 172, 348.

confused in the midst of our trials and reversals and misfortunes, but God has a plan.

When Joseph says to his brothers near the end of their story, “Even though you intended it for evil – even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good. God intended to preserve a numerous people,” This does not mean that God made the evil things to happen. It means that we are never alone in our suffering, God is always with us whether we can see it or not, and God will redeem our lives for the good. In the chaos of uncertainty and fear and regret this story of Joseph and his brothers invites us to trust. To trust because God has a plan. Henri Nouwen wrote, “Forgiveness is the name of love practiced by those who love poorly...” And I suppose all of us love poorly at some time or another. Nouwen went on, “The practice of forgiveness involves us in a whole way of life, a way that is shaped by an ever-deepening friendship with God and with other people. Learning to live as forgiven and forgiving people is a lifelong task...”

After thirty years on death row in an Alabama prison, Ray Hinton chose to forgive the people who put him there in order to truly be free. Twenty years after his brothers counted him as dead, Joseph chose to forgive them. Joseph chose to see God’s hand in his life and in the life of his extended family... which was becoming the whole people of ancient Israel.

Can we pause for a moment, and remember that insult or grudge or grievance that will not let us go... Can we turn it in the light of trusting that God has a plan... and then..... can we choose forgiveness?

AMEN.

