

Forgiveness...A Lifelong Practice

Genesis 50:15-21

Matthew 18:21-22

Will you pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer? Amen.

The ancient Hebrews taught forgiveness long before Jesus did, so as he studied the Torah, Jesus must have been familiar with Joseph's story. And he would have gleaned from Joseph's experience with his brothers much about forgiveness. But as he would do with many teachings from the Torah, Jesus would add his own spin. In doing so, he raised the level of consciousness on the planet, but many people found his new interpretations of God and humankind extremely disturbing.

They are still disturbing. And that is because they are demanding. Jesus lived within a culture where survival depended on following certain social customs. Loyalty, swearing an oath, family honor, tribal allegiance and revenge were foundational. Humiliation and even ostracism were considered just punishment for even the slightest infraction. Anyone who shrank from these ancient customs was considered a wimp.

Forgiveness? Giving someone a break? Empathy? A very tough sell. Because when forgiveness is practiced as Jesus asked us to practice it - from the heart - it requires a kind of breaking down of the self, that is, a willingness to place one's pride on the altar. Martin Buber, the eminent twentieth century theologian in his book *Good and Evil* says, "All real love is sacrificial." Forgiving requires real love. And if all real love is sacrificial, then forgiving is also painful.

It is this aspect of forgiveness that makes it so difficult and still a tough sell after two thousand years. So don't be fooled. Forgiveness workshops abound and gurus push painless forgiveness like dentists push painless dentistry! But rushing into a happy dappy forgiveness only makes everything okay for an afternoon. Such a superficial approach to Jesus' most significant spiritual discipline is not at all what Jesus or the Torah had in mind. And so we turn to Joseph's story.

In the beginning of this tale, Joseph was no more able to forgive his brothers for what they had done than we are when someone in our lives has harmed us.

Let's recall some of the story of Joseph and his Technicolor dream-coat, that famous coat of many colors that his father had made especially for him.

Joseph is only one of the *twelve* sons of Jacob, and as his beloved Rachel's only son, is clearly Jacob's favorite. Whenever a parent plays favorites, there is trouble. Joseph's jealous brothers plot against him, throw him into a pit in the desert, hoping the jackals will go in after him. Instead, Joseph is discovered by some wandering Midianites who then sell him off to Potiphar, the captain of the Egyptian guard. Eventually, he is made a slave and imprisoned.

Joseph, miserable, betrayed, separated from his family in this foreign land, nevertheless distinguishes himself as an interpreter of dreams and soon becomes one of Pharaoh's trusted friends. One night, the Pharaoh has a series of dreams,

and when Joseph is asked to interpret them, he warns the Pharaoh that there is going to be a famine. Privy to such advance warning from Joseph, the Pharaoh is able to tell his people how to prepare, save grain, and get ready. Joseph is put in charge, and his estimation in Pharaoh's eyes is ratcheted up another notch.

The famine spreads north to Canaan where Joseph's father and his eleven brothers are now living in squalor, hungry and without resources. They make their way to Egypt and beg the Pharaoh to help them.

The Pharaoh sends them, unknowingly, to their brother Joseph, who is now the second most powerful man in all of Egypt, standing at the Pharaoh's side. Joseph recognizes his brothers immediately, but the brothers have no idea that this powerful, grown man they are standing in front of is the boy they had thrown into a pit thirteen years earlier. Reunion time? Hugs all around? Not a chance.

Even after all those years away from his family, with plenty of time to take all the forgiveness workshops in Egypt, the scriptures show us that at the mere sight of his conniving brothers, Joseph was incensed. Scripture says, "When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them."

Joseph gets back at them, bit by bit. He puts them through one harrowing test after another, tormenting them by accusing them of being spies. He terrorizes them and watches them squirm for about *five* chapters in Genesis.

The brothers' paranoia sets in: They say, "Alas we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother." Joseph's half way decent older brother Reuben says, "Did I not tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen." The blame game has started.

But, when Reuben shows this small sign of repentance, Joseph's tough exterior, that wall of pain and pride, begins to crack. The scriptures say, "He turned away from them and wept." Reunion time? Hugs all around? Nope. Not quite. Joseph continues to test them, planting money in their packs to make it look as if they stole it and seeing what they would do.

At one point, he makes them go all the way back to Canaan to get little Benjamin who had stayed with his father Jacob. But when Joseph sees his little brother Benjamin, there is another crack in his wall. The scripture says, "... Joseph hurried out, because he was overcome with affection for his brother ... "

Well, surely it's reunion time by now. But no. Joseph again looks at his miserable band of brothers and orders them like common servants: "Serve the meal." He is just not done. Not finished with years of rage and bitterness.

Finally - about chapter 45 – one of the great miracles of the human spirit occurs. Joseph's love for his brothers, in one last internal struggle, overcomes his ancient hatred and this time love wins. Joseph breaks down completely and makes himself known to his brothers.

And so we come to the passage we read this morning, to real reunion, authentic forgiveness, forgiveness from a heart that could only get there by first acknowledging and struggling with its pain and brokenness.

It is only when there is this kind of searing truth about our pain that we can truly forgive. It is not that forgiveness, then, is only something we offer to someone else. It is so that we can repair not only the breach between ourselves and another, but so that we can repair the breach within ourselves.

When I was minister in Stonington, our Adult Forum used as our teaching basis a film [Journey Films] called "The Power of Forgiveness." I will never forget

the testimony of Elie Weisel – who died just this past July by the way- still unable to forgive Germany for the Holocaust. He just couldn't do it. But I will never forget the heroic words and actions of the parents of the Amish school girls who had been shot and their immediate response was to offer care and concern to the shooter and his family. It was astounding. And I will never forget the faces of the wives and mothers who lost loved ones on nine eleven, and yet pushed on through their pain to plant "gardens of forgiveness." That there was pain and rage? No question. That there was the grace of God to breakthrough and claim a greater truth? No question.

Joseph ends his story, as we heard this morning, by telling us that much good had come out of even his darkest experience. Healing, insight, and a kind of spiritual freedom seems to be the signature of authentic forgiveness.

It is interesting that Luke, in chapter 17, verses 3 & 4 makes mention of repentance, but Matthew does not. Is repentance by the offender a key part of the forgiveness package? Well, it may make things easier. The words, "I'm sorry" go a long way. But, on the other hand, Jesus says that we are called to forgive others - repentance or no repentance - because we have been forgiven for a whole pile of our own stuff first! Think of all the things we have done or said without even thinking and some good soul – not to mention God – has silently and graciously forgiven us.

And so the only appropriate response to such love, God's love and the love of our family and friends, is to extend it to others, seventy times seven, repentance or not, in a constant and continual commitment to keeping the Light of healing moving around the world. Forgiveness, then, in its most metaphysical sense, is not about us at all. It's about God, God in the world, and God within you. It's about our contribution to the whole dynamic of energy and power that manifests this universe, that influences the web of life that you and I are a part of.

A final thought: When Jesus told Peter that he had to forgive seventy times seven – you know I think Peter was REALLY HOPING that Jesus would give a really LOW number...like, "Yeah sure a couple times, then blow it off Pete" - I think it was the Master's way of telling him, and us, that he knows right well this forgiveness thing is one of the most difficult of spiritual practices.

"Seventy times seven" is Jesus' metaphor for "forever", his acknowledgement that forgiveness is a lifelong project. When it seems impossible, when you feel totally stuck, [Has that ever happened to you? It has to me. When you just can't get there, what do you do? I can tell you what I do. I ask God to forgive ME! And then I keep working at it, turning it over to God, asking God to just handle it for me for right now.] So when you are stuck, maybe that is the time to wade into it, like Joseph did, as best you can, one step at a time, believing that gradually we all can dismantle those barriers of the soul that block the flow of Love not only within ourselves, but without- in our very troubled world.

Practicing forgiveness is hard, but it is worth it. Practicing forgiveness, you see, is a mutual form of justice. As a wise teacher once said, "To forgive is to set the prisoner free and then discover the prisoner was you."

Let's pray: Holy One, we ask that you bless us in our practice of forgiveness. Allow us to feel your guidance and care as we navigate through some of our most painful experiences. As we remember all the sorrow and devastation of 15 years ago, may we know that even if we are limited in our abilities, your love is boundless, and that, in the fullness of time, you in your compassion for the world will bring peace and healing to the world's collective heart. Amen. -----