

Scriptures:

Genesis 45:3-11, 15

Luke 6:27-38

Holy Forgiveness

When I first read the Hebrew Bible text from Genesis this week I thought briefly that's a good story and moved on to the next texts. It wasn't until I read the Gospel text where Jesus is telling us to love our enemies that the profound truth of Joseph's story really hit. Just in case you had forgotten the context or you slept during the reading let me give you a bit of background.

Without the full story there is little impact. I am going to go back to the 37th chapter of Genesis to help us get the big picture.

Jacob settled with his sons in the land of Canaan. Joseph was 17 years old and was shepherding flocks with his brothers. It is reported that Jacob loved Joseph (his youngest) more than any of his other children and so he made him a robe of long sleeves (or a coat of many colours depending upon the translation). It was a coat that set him apart and showed that he was above the others. The others had short sleeve, shorter robes that made it so that they could labour in the fields. Longer robes were given to the more prestigious. That somewhat understandably set him up against his brothers and they hated him.

Joseph also seemed to take his position to heart and when he had dream about he and his brothers working out in the field binding sheaves. Apparently he dreamt his sheave rose up above theirs and their sheaves all bowed down to his. This upset his brothers and they questioned him because they felt he was saying he was to have dominion over them. He also had a dream about the sun, moon and stars bowing down to him.

The story carries on and one day his brothers are out working in the fields and Jacob sends Joseph to check on them but as they see him coming they plot to kill him. Reuben convinced them not to kill him but to instead throw him into a pit (he planned to rescue him later). They agreed thinking he would die in the wilderness and so, they attacked him, stripped him of his robe and threw him into the pit leaving him to die. However, soon thereafter a caravan of Ishmaelites came along and Judah made another suggestion. So that they didn't have his blood on their hands they sold Joseph as a slave for 20 pieces of silver.

They then killed a goat and covered Joseph's torn robe with blood and took it to their father saying they had found it along the road. Of course Jacob was devastated, mourned and could not be comforted.

Eventually Joseph was sold to Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard. Throughout his years as a servant he became honoured by his master and worked his way up to a place of authority in Egypt (there are a whole lot of juicy stories in the midst of this part of Genesis that I won't get into now but it is well worth the read). Joseph was so loved by the Pharaoh that he placed him second in command of the kingdom of Egypt. After seven years of prosperity in Egypt a famine hit the land and it was only the Pharaoh who had supplies because

Joseph has predicted the famine in a dream and it was only the Pharaoh who paid attention and set up storehouses of wheat and supplies. Eventually Joseph's brothers find themselves asking Joseph for mercy. Joseph gives to them in plenty. There are many encounters with his brothers until the moment we read this morning when Joseph breaks down and reveals himself to his brothers who don't even know him anymore because of his prestige in Egypt.

Now pause for a moment. Who here has issues with people? Maybe friends, maybe even a sibling. Anyone have a story like Joseph's? This man was thrown into a pit to die and then sold as a slave by his brothers and he forgives them.

No biblical story narrates the grief, time, joy and miracle of reconciliation as powerfully as the drama of Joseph. The emotional intensity of the climax in chapter 45 is intense. I can feel it in my bones, it takes my breath away.

Joseph doesn't just say it's alright - move on. The Egyptians overheard Joseph's sobbing in the next room; the weeping and embracing is astonishing, and so beautiful – and then I can't help but race ahead to the riveting moment when Joseph is reunited with his father; “he fell on his neck, and wept on his neck a long time” (Gen. 46:29).

In this encounter the brothers had to be stricken with shock, horror, guilt, trepidation, remorse. But Joseph said to them “Do not be distressed; don't be angry with yourselves because you sold me here. For God sent me here to preserve life” (Gen 45:5). Imagine how long it took for that to sink into the brothers. And then even after the glorious reunion with his father, and then even after Jacob's death, Joseph said the most remarkable thing: he said “Do not be afraid. You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, so that many people should be kept alive” (Gen 50:20). Joseph forgave; he cast their common, broken life into the hands of God's larger intentions. He allowed their evil to become a testimony to God's miracle – in the big story, but then also in Joseph's gentle disposition. He turned their human error into divine grace. Who is capable of that kind of forgiveness?

Perhaps one of the best parts of the story is that the brothers weren't given a “second chance,” another crack at getting it right. They never got it right; they never made up for what they had done. God did not depend on any attitude change among the brothers. God quite simply used the evil they perpetrated and transformed it into good.

Now please hear this... I don't believe for a second God caused them to do evil: God did not make them sell their brother or break their father's heart. That's is not God's work or doing. But God gathered up their misdeeds, the broken will of God, and pieced it all together for God's good purpose. Joseph's leadership was defined by seeing, understanding, and articulating this. He brought healing to the fractured family, and food to a hungry world – his leading was God's mysterious, miraculous use of his life. God uses evil but doesn't cause it; God turns the world upside-down and uses evil for good. Some evils are just evil, and it eviscerates and trivializes the suffering to try sunnily to claim God brings some good from it.

I cannot stand in a theological stance that would claim God causes us heartbreak and allows evil to happen to us so that we will learn or be broken. On the other hand I believe God can transform

our heartbreak, our darkness and our broken places to places of beauty, grace, love and mercy if we allow that in-breaking of the spirit to transform us as Joseph did.

Reconciliation takes time, a long time. Reconciliation isn't forgive and forget; it's genuine healing – for everybody involved. Joseph needed the healing as much as the brothers and their father did. The beneficiaries of this reconciliation? Not just this family, but people who had never known them!

The moment when Joseph breaks down into tears and reveals himself to his brothers states “Joseph could control himself no longer.” We are control freaks – but the healing comes when we yield control and let the emotions roll. The emotion isn't Oh, I feel God! but rather, Wow, God is releasing, and healing me!

Jesus says love your enemies, bless those who curse you. We might picture being forced to love strangers or dangerous people; Jesus' first listeners might have growled at the Roman or tax collector. But perhaps the enemies we must love are within our friends, our family or even the church (given our divisions...) and maybe even (not to psychoanalyze) within my own soul.

Ben Witherington, reflecting on Jesus and forgiveness, tells a story he heard Corrie ten Boom tell. Just as the story of Joseph's forgiveness struck deep this did too. Ten Boom shares “It was in a church in Munich that I saw him, a balding heavysset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear.

It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I liked to think that that's where forgiven sins were thrown.

“When we confess our sins,” I said, “God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever.” The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room. And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones.

It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbrück concentration camp where we were sent. Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: “A fine message, fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!”

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

“You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk,” he was saying. “I was a guard in there.” No, he did not remember me.

“But since that time,” he went on, “I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein”—again the hand came out—“will you forgive me?”

...Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. “If you do not forgive men their trespasses,” Jesus says, “neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality.

Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

“Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”

For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.

And having thus learned to forgive in this hardest of situations, I never again had difficulty in forgiving: I wish I could say it! I wish I could say that merciful and charitable thoughts just naturally flowed from me from then on. But they didn’t.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned at 80 years of age, it’s that I can’t store up good feelings and behavior—but only draw them fresh from God each day.

Maybe I’m glad it’s that way. For every time I go to Him, He teaches me something else. I recall the time, some 15 years ago, when some Christian friends whom I loved and trusted did something which hurt me.

You would have thought that, having forgiven the Nazi guard, this would have been child’s play. It wasn’t. For weeks I seethed inside. But at last I asked God again to work His miracle in me.

And again it happened: first the cold-blooded decision, then the flood of joy and peace.

I had forgiven my friends; I was restored to my Father.

Then, why was I suddenly awake in the middle of the night, hashing over the whole affair again? My friends! I thought. People I loved! If it had been strangers, I wouldn't have minded so. I sat up and switched on the light. "Father, I thought it was all forgiven! Please help me do it!" But the next night I woke up again. They'd talked so sweetly too! Never a hint of what they were planning. "Father!" I cried in alarm. "Help me!"

His help came in the form of a kindly Lutheran pastor to whom I confessed my failure after two sleepless weeks.

"Up in that church tower," he said, nodding out the window, "is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging. First ding then dong. Slower and slower until there's a final dong and it stops.

"I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive someone, we take our hand off the rope. But if we've been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They're just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down."

And so it proved to be. There were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in my conversation. But the force—which was my willingness in the matter—had gone out of them. They came less and less often and at last stopped altogether.

And so I discovered another secret of forgiveness: that we can trust God not only above our emotions, but also above our thoughts.¹

I can't top these stories of forgiveness. Joseph and Corrie ten Boom have embraced the healing presence of the Holy in ways I have yet to experience. I am so thankful for having had to opportunity to read these stories to learn from them to imagine the healing that is possible. Thank God for love and grace and the opportunity to return again and again to these teachings. Thank God for living stories that show us that what Jesus teaches and what God dreams for us is possibly beyond our comprehension. Holy one open my heart teach me you ways that all the world may experience this holy love.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/positive-living/guideposts-classics-corrie-ten-boom-on-forgiveness>