

“Forgiveness and Reconciliation”

Genesis 45:1-15

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Is there any more pesky, irritating or persistent Christian teaching than that of forgiveness?

Each time I preach about forgiveness because it comes up in the Lectionary reading, I am typically glad to be done with the whole struggle to make sense of it. The trouble, however, is that the next passage on forgiveness is never far behind the one I just finished. The Bible is filled with passages like the forgiving land owner who relieves a man of his debt, but who in turn does not forgive someone else's debt to him. There's the story of the prodigal son, the words of the Lord's Prayer, the love your enemy teaching, the beatitudes and Jesus' words from the cross imploring God to forgive his executioners. This morning we hear the story of Joseph forgiving his brothers for selling him into slavery.

The Bible is replete with forgiveness stuff, you can't get away from it no matter how much you might try. Because of these biblical passages and much of our religious history, Christianity is our cultural flag bearer when it comes to forgiveness and reconciliation. We are stuck with this role. If anyone is supposed to know something about forgiveness, we are. We are to know how to speak about it, what it feels like to be forgiven both practically and existentially, and we are to know what it feels like to offer forgiveness in small and large matters.

Even for some of the most diehard Christians in the world, forgiveness is a real struggle.

In a recent book, Miroslav Volf, a leading voice in the Christian community today wrote of his struggle to forgive. Volf lived in Croatia during the violent conflicts of the 1980's and 1990's. In the book Volf tells how the theologian Jurgen Moltmann once asked if Volf could embrace a Chetnik, one of the Serbian fighters who had been burning churches and raping and killing in Volf's native land. Volf answered Moltmann's question this way: "No, I cannot – but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to."

Forgiveness is such a haunting part of our Christian faith. It is central to our faith, to God's ways, to the beauty and survival of our world. But it is so difficult, complicated and just plain distasteful. "I cannot – but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to." There is

no real satisfaction in hate and revenge, but forgiveness feels unnatural and lacking in justice.

The portion of the Joseph saga read this morning is the concluding, reconciliation portion. Just to refresh your memories regarding Joseph and his brothers let me recount a bit of what has happened. Joseph is the youngest of twelve sons born to the patriarch, Jacob. Joseph is not much liked by his older brothers because he seems to think too highly of himself and predicted that his brothers would all bow before him one day. Joseph was also Jacob's favorite son – it always cause conflicts between siblings when one is considered the favorite.

One day Joseph's brothers got rid of him by selling him into slavery – they were cruel and they told their father that Joseph had been killed.

But through a variety of tragic and amazing twists and turns Joseph rises in power in Egypt. The Egyptian pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of the national food reserves. Back in Canaan Joseph's family and people begin to starve because of drought and famine, so they go to Egypt to get food. Not knowing that Joseph is the one they are seeking help from, they bow down to him.

Joseph recognized his brothers and must struggle with the issue of whether to forgive them and help them. As we read, Joseph does embrace them and provides them with food. It isn't that Joseph is just a nice guy, nor is it that forgiveness is easy for him – the story would indicate that revenge was something that entered his mind. I would even say that personal concerns only play a small role in Joseph's decision to forgive his brothers. In Joseph's mind and heart the reason he needed to forgive and help his brothers was because of what it would mean for his people, God's people.

Joseph came to believe that all his suffering took place so that one day he could help save his people. While he could not see it while it was happening, his decisions and faithfulness were leading him into his destiny, to provide for his people when they most needed it. His decision to forgive his brothers was to a large extent made because it was necessary for a larger good. If Joseph took revenge it would not only mean the end of his brothers it would also decimate many innocent people. In his wisdom Joseph decided to forgive and help his people.

Sometimes in our very individualist society we forget that we are part of a larger story. When we talk to each other about injustices that come our way, we are quick to talk about our person rights, but we say little about how our decisions might affect our

families, communities or even God. And even if we do mention these connections we don't typically give them much credibility. Yes, we know that the Bible and even our out of touch minister who seldom practices what he preaches, teach us that we are called to forgive, but our laws and popular opinion say that's mostly bleeding heart stuff that gets you nowhere. Forgiveness is counter-cultural for us, it is counter to personal satisfaction and in so many ways it just enables questionable people to get away with bad stuff. Yet, of all that God in Christ insists is absolutely necessary for God's kingdom to flourish on earth, forgiveness, mercy and reconciliation are at the top of the list.

The biblical history tells the story of how God, after kicking people out of the garden, after causing the pain of childbirth and working the fields, after confusing people's ability to understand what each other are saying, after sending floods and plagues and wars and fish to swallow people whole, after all this and more God finally figures out that the only way that we are going to keep from annihilating ourselves is to create a path back out of the holes we dig for ourselves. The path that God creates is the path of forgiveness.

Forgive one another as I have forgiven you. God was in the world reconciling humankind to his/her heart.

While most of our world continues to believe that war, revenge and oppression are the path to saving the world, or at least their part of it, our Christian faith insistently proclaims that forgiveness is the path that can make for peace, hope, reconciliation and finally justice.

Return with me for a moment to the story of Joseph. In the story Joseph doesn't just forgive and tell his brother to be cruel to him again. Joseph makes it clear that his forgiveness is a matter of making a decision for the greater good of their people, his forgiveness was not the exoneration of the brother's actions. There is no condoning of cruelty because it may produce a future good.

Forgiveness is not what we often think it is. It is not a passive stance that allows oppressors to continue their destructive ways. Forgiveness implies consequences and transformation, at times through formal actions and at other times through the internal churning of our souls.

I am always interested to hear and see what a succeeding generation or individual does with all the good and bad stuff given to them by the older generation. I know in my own life forgiveness has been an essential element of my journey, and I pray that it will be an essential part of my children's journey.

I remember quite distinctly when my family and I moved to Menomonie, that I was acutely aware of my father's shortcomings. I was aware that even when I asked he had little guidance to give me, I remember that he always talked about being powerless in life and how he pointed to mine my and siblings successes and never listened to our struggles and hurts. I think my dad developed these personality traits naturally from his family and without knowing it exactly, he was passing them on to me.

I remember one day in Menomonie when I was with my son Jacob who was probably less than 5 years old. I was saying something to him, as if he had more power in life than I did. After I said it I couldn't believe it. I was acting just like my father. It was at that very moment that I knew I needed to not burden my son with these same shortcomings, while still wanting to pass on the gifts my dad gave to me.

After some counseling and soul searching I came to the conclusion that the only way for me to move onto another path with my son, was to forgive my dad and myself for our shortcomings. My journey to become a better father was more a process of letting go than it was about working harder.

I have no illusions about having become the perfect father, but I feel that Jacob will not have to carry some baggage in life that isn't his to carry. And I pray that he will have some forgiveness in his heart for me as he continues to mature in wisdom.

Forgiveness is a complicated path, it forces us to look into the mysteries of life and how each of us ended up on our particular path. But forgiveness is a remarkable gift without which our personal lives and the wellbeing of all people are in jeopardy. May we embrace the power of forgiveness to break us open in a new and hope filled spirit.