

March 20, 2024 – Genesis 50:15-21 & Colossians 3:12-17

The story of Joseph is long and tragic and, frankly, kind of depressing. Occupying 13 chapters, over a quarter of the book of Genesis is dedicated to the account, shining a pretty prominent light on this last of the great patriarchs of Israel. And drawing our attention to this remarkable man and all that he endured.

Born the eleventh of twelve brothers, Joseph was the favorite son of Jacob and gifted from an early age with the gift of prophecy. But while his father may have loved Joseph dearly and doted on him with gifts like the famous “technicolor dream coat,” Joseph's brothers hated him.

They hated his honesty, as he reported their misbehavior to their father. They hated his dreams, that foretold a day when Joseph would rule over them and they would bow down to him. They hated all the special treatment their father gave to Joseph.

And finally, all that hatred boiled over. They attacked Joseph and threw him into a pit, intending to murder him, but eventually settling for just selling him into slavery. A few lies to their father later and Joseph was out of their lives for good. Or so they thought.

Things wouldn't get much better for Joseph in the years ahead, as over and over again, Joseph's upright conduct and honesty was rewarded with betrayal and heartache. Slavery would lead to imprisonment after a false accusation of raping his owner's wife. Imprisonment would lead to more imprisonment as the fellow prisoners that Joseph aided would fail to help him in return.

Only after years of unjust suffering would Joseph finally be released from his jail cell and promoted to a high office in pharaoh's court. But, of course, that only happened because Joseph correctly interpreted the king's dream, prophesying a massive, seven year famine that would destroy the land and kill millions unless the king acted quickly to begin storing up food.

It's in the midst of this tragic famine that Joseph is reunited with his family. He is understandably suspicious of his brothers. Have they changed at all? Are they still the hateful, lying, murderous bullies that sold him into slavery? After years and years of being deceived and betrayed by everyone he thought he could trust, Joseph is more than a little suspicious of them.

But, ultimately, he can't hide his identity from them anymore. Not because he particularly wants to see them. But because he wants to see his father. Jacob is a very old man by this point, 130 years old. And Joseph is desperate to see him before he dies.

Thankfully, Jacob has a few more years of life in him. For 17 years, Jacob and his sons live in the land of Goshen in Egypt, enjoying all the privileges of having a son in Pharaoh's court. They are well-cared for and when Jacob finally dies, Joseph honors his father's dying wish to be taken back to the Promised Land and buried in Canaan.

And so we arrive at today's Old Testament Reading in the final chapter of Genesis. And we discover that what looks like a neat, tidy, happy ending to this story does still have one loose end.

You see, Joseph had been very clear to his brothers that his invitation for them to live in Egypt was done out of love for their father. But he doesn't really say much about what he thinks of them. Is he still angry with them? Does he still want revenge for all that they did to him? Was he just being nice to them out of love for their father?

The brothers have become creatures of deceit. For 15 years, they lied to their father about what happened to Joseph. And now they expect everyone around them to be compulsive liars as well. And, in fact, they tell yet another lie in this very passage: *“They sent a message to Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this command before he died: ‘Say to Joseph, “Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.””*”

Um... no. Jacob never said that. Nowhere in scripture is that request recorded. They fabricated the whole thing, most likely. Just as they've lied about everything else in their lives.

Simply put, Joseph has no reason to help them. No reason to trust them. No reason to forgive them. And they know it. And so, even after 17 years of the kindness that he's shown to them, they still expect him to hate them and pay them back for all the evil they did to him.

There's only one way to rebuild this relationship. There's only one way for this family to be whole again. There's only one way to truly reconcile. And that is for Joseph to forgive them.

Not just forgive them in his heart. He has to forgive them out loud. Face to face. Man to man. *“Do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones,”* he tells them.

Do not fear, I'm not going to take revenge on you. Do not fear, I won't punish your children for what you did to me. Do not fear, I don't hate you.

It's such an important thing, but we overlook it so often. The power of forgiving someone. Not just forgiving them in your heart. But forgiving them out loud. Face to face. Man to man. Openly and honestly forgiving them.

Quite often, it is the only way to rebuild a relationship. It is the only way to make a relationship whole again. Because when you don't. When you leave that forgiveness unsaid and uncertain, then there's always the lingering fear that there's anger underneath the surface. That's there's hatred behind every word. That there's revenge waiting around every corner.

There's a reason why St Paul makes such a point about this. He says in 2 Corinthians 2 that when someone sins against you, *“turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.”* He says in Ephesians 4, *“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”*

And he says virtually the same thing in our Epistle lesson today. If anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other. As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

And see, that's the key. We forgive as Christ forgave us. And just as Joseph was open in his forgiveness to his brothers, Jesus is open in his forgiveness to us. He doesn't hide it. He doesn't keep it inside himself. Even as he's being nailed to the cross for the sins of mankind, he proclaims it to all the world. *“Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*

Joseph went through a lifetime of pain and betrayal and suffering and only really understood the purpose of it all at the very end. He tells his brothers, *“You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”* He saw the plan of salvation that God had for Egypt and his family, and it led him to forgive his brothers in love.

Jesus didn't go through a lifetime of pain and betrayal and suffering to understand God's plan of salvation. No, he knew it from the very beginning. He entered this life knowing it would bring pain and betrayal and suffering because he forgave us. Because he loved us. Because he wanted to bring it about that many should be made alive through him.

No matter the sin that we have committed against him. No matter the ways that we have betrayed his trust. No matter the times that we have vainly tried to deceive him with a false display of goodness. He forgives us.

And he sends men like me to proclaim forgiveness to you. Proclaim it through the washing of rebirth we find in Holy Baptism. Proclaim it through the Body and Blood of Christ given and shed for the forgiveness of your sins. Proclaim it by standing up here and saying, in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

I speak to you with the voice of him who sent me. That you may never fear his hatred or revenge. That you may never doubt his honesty or faithfulness. That you may never question his truthfulness. He really does forgive you.

And he calls you to forgive as he has forgiven you. *“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”* Forgive as Joseph forgave his brothers. Forgive knowing that that we are not in the place of God. So if God in Christ Jesus has chosen to forgive them and include them in his plan of salvation, then who are we to withhold our forgiveness?

He has provided for us and our little ones. He has given the promise of forgiveness to you and your children and all who are far off. He has comforted us and spoken kindly to us and proclaimed to us his forgiveness. That we may proclaim that same forgiveness to all the world. Amen.