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Genesis 42:1-17
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Joseph: Forgiveness

Many a family has experienced the tension felt by an older child when a new baby is brought into the house. It may be OK for a few days but as the real changes in family living that come with a new baby are felt more deeply, it is not unusual for the older sibling to suggest, "Take the baby back!"

Sibling rivalry as we call it today is a part of every family's life. It's normal to hear: "It's not fair." "You let him do it." "She always gets what she wants." "When's my turn?" But sometimes, it escalates to "I hate him. I wish she were dead."

"Dad always liked you best" was the jealous taunt of Joseph's brothers when he was young. And they were right. For his own reasons, Jacob did love Joseph best. Yet, as we know from this story and our own lives, extreme favoritism by parents and grandparents has insidiously destructive consequences for young people and their families. Rage erupts and lives are changed forever. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery.

Twenty years have passed since that day. In the mean time, Joseph has had significant downs and ups. He journeyed from being a slave to head of Potiphar's (the chief guard) household, thrown into prison, and then elevated to his position as Governor of all Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. Now in the time of famine, Joseph is in charge of distributing and selling the stored grain. Joseph's brothers have come to Egypt to buy grain so that their families will not starve. None of them have any idea of what is about to happen.

You get up in the morning thinking it will be just another ordinary day at work. But life can change in an instant. You look up from your paperwork and there bowing in front of you are the very brothers who have haunted your nightmares for twenty years. You know them in an instant, but they don't recognize you. What will you do? The future hangs in the balance.

In your imagination, you have played out sweet revenge time and time again. And now your chance is right in front of you. It is a moment of heart stopping and heart wrenching decision. It is such moments that define who we are.

Joseph could simply send them away empty handed to return home and starve, and try to forget he ever saw them. On the other hand, he had enough power he could have them all executed on the spot. The whole family, the future of Israel, is on the edge of destruction.

Joseph is not ready to forgive. The kind of abuse that Joseph experienced is not something lightly forgotten or forgiven. It must be confronted. He begins by putting his brothers in prison for three days – a reality check for them – and it gives him time to think. In closing them behind the prison door temporarily, ironically Joseph is keeping the door open for the possibility of a different future between them.

I have heard people in telling this story say that Joseph forgave his brothers “no strings attached” and was simply reconciled to them. However, that is not the story. There are three whole chapters where Joseph struggles with the spiritual challenges of forgiveness and the question of the possibility of reconciliation.

During this time, Joseph tests his brothers to see who they have become. It is only when finally one brother offers himself in exchange for another that Joseph reveals who he is and begins the process of reconciliation.

Too often we have heard “forgive and forget.” Yet true forgiveness, in grievous situations like Joseph’s, requires first acknowledging the pain and even horror of what happened. Joseph’s question is not only whether he can forgive but also can he be reconciled with his brothers. These are two different matters. To forgive is to unbind the ties to past sins and violations for the possibilities of new life in the future. To forgive is to be released. Forgiveness is as much for the benefit of the forgiver as for the one being forgiven. As an old Chinese Proverb says, “The one who seeks revenge should dig two graves.”

But reconciliation is about more than just forgiveness. It is possible to forgive but not be reconciled. It is possible to be released from the past but decide not be in direct relationship with the other person. In some cases it is crucial not to reconcile because the abuse will simply continue. Reconciliation means moving back into relationship with those who have sinned against you or against whom you have sinned. This requires repentance - a change in behavior. If someone keeps saying they are sorry but continues to be hurtful that is not repentance. Repentance means doing the hard work of change.

This spiritual work takes time and it is spiritually exhausting. Throughout his time of discernment about the possibility of reconciliation, Joseph’s heart is broken open time and time again. He weeps – when he overhears his brothers speaking of him and what they did to him, when he first sees his brother Benjamin, and finally when he reveals himself to all his brothers.

As the story says,

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. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph...I am your brother.” ...And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him. (Gen. 45:1-3a, 15)

Where is forgiveness at work in your life? Who do you need to forgive? From whom do you need to ask forgiveness? Do you need to forgive yourself?

Forgiveness is part of our Christian calling. Jesus said

Forgive and you will be forgiven (Luke 6:37)

You are to forgive not only seven times, but seventy-times seven. (Matthew 18:22)

You must forgive your brother or sister from your heart. (Matthew 18:35)

Forgiveness is a spiritual practice that requires practice. In the letter to the Colossians we read, *Just as God has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.* (3:13)

Each week, in the Lord's Prayer, we pray for forgiveness and for the grace to forgive. *Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.* The word 'debts' comes from Matthew's version of the prayer (6:9-13).

Luke's version (11:1-4) uses more overt theological language *Forgive us our sins.*

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

This is the one part of the Lord's prayer where our direct activity is called for. The forgiveness we receive is bound up with the forgiveness we offer. This means that if we are unwilling to forgive then we are unable to fully experience forgiveness. This is not a quid pro quo statement. It is simply a recognition that the receiving and giving of forgiveness flow through the same channel.

Here are some other translations of this phrase based on various connotations of the Aramaic words Jesus might have used.

*Loose the cords of mistakes binding us,
as we release the strands we hold of others' guilt.*

Lighten our load of secret debts, as we relieve others of their need to repay.

Forgive our hidden past, the secret shames, as we consistently forgive what others hide.

("Moving Toward Forgiveness," by Marjorie J. Thompson. *The Weavings Reader: Living with God in the World*, John S. Mogabgab, Editor, pg. 220)

The debts, the sins, the hidden past, the secret shames, the cords of mistakes that bind us are always in need of healing – in need of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian message. A bumper sticker I saw the other day put it this way, "No Perfect, Just Forgiven." We know the truth of our brokenness, individually and collectively.

We know we need to be saved from ourselves sometimes. We know we need help to be whole.

In Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection we see God's forgiveness and reconciliation at work. Too often people speak only of the crucifixion as the act of forgiveness, as if it were a payment for forgiveness. But in speaking of forgiveness it is crucial to hold together the crucifixion and the resurrection. The crucifixion is humanity's attempt to drive a permanent wedge between God

and humans. It is an attempt to stop Jesus from his radical ways of crossing social barriers, forgiving the unforgiveable, and challenging the powers that be. The resurrection is God's response that such an action is ultimately impossible, *for nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.* (Romans 8: 39)

Forgiveness and reconciliation is resurrection madness. By the ways of the world it is crazy. By the ways of God it is eternal life.

In a prayer entitled, "I Praise You for this Resurrection Madness" Ted Loder writes, (*Guerrillas of Grace*, p. 123)

*Lord of ...amazing surprises
for this mercy
that blots out my betrayals
and bids me begin again,
to limp on,
to hop-skip-and-jump on,
to mend what is broken
in and around me,
and to forgive the breakers;*

...
*for this kingdom
unleashed in me and I in it forever,*

...
*(with) no dead ends to living,
to making peace,
to dreaming dreams,
to being glad of heart;*

...
*for this resurrection madness
which is wiser than I
and in which I see
how great you are,
how full of grace.
Alleluia!*