

We're continuing in our sermon series entitled, "Learning to Love Our Enemies." Last week we talked about the importance of repair or reconciliation when it comes to our enemies. Today we move from repairing a relationship to the deeper question of what happens when the wound cannot simply be undone. In today's biblical story, we find Joseph and his brothers. Did you know that Joseph's story is the first place where the word "forgiveness" is mentioned in Scripture? This week's passage reads like an epilogue to the Joseph story, almost an afterthought. But first...a quick recap of Joseph, the Dreamer's, story. Joseph was one of the twelve sons/tribes of Jacob, also known as Israel, and a central figure in the last fourteen chapters of the book of Genesis (chapters 37-50). Joseph is Jacob's beloved son, and his brothers become jealous of him, especially after Joseph shares dreams that seem to suggest they will one day bow down to him. It doesn't help that Joseph marveled at his own specialness and chosen-ness- an idea reinforced by his father, who got only him a special coat of many colors. Younger Joseph was a tattler and could come off as self-centered and self-absorbed. His brothers wanted to kill him and threw him into a pit bought then decided to sell him into slavery, and Joseph is taken to Egypt. They kill a goat, put it's blood on Joseph's special coat, take it to their father, Jacob, and tell him that Joseph is dead. What a betrayal not just to Joseph but also to Jacob! In Egypt, Joseph experiences both success and injustice. He rises in the household of Potiphar but is falsely accused and imprisoned. Eventually, Joseph's ability to interpret dreams brings him before Pharaoh, and he is placed in charge of preparing Egypt for a coming famine. Joseph's life story could be told as from pit to prison to palace. The famine eventually

brings Joseph's brothers to Egypt seeking food. Joseph recognizes them, but they do not recognize him at first. After four trips to Egypt and a long process of testing, confronting, holding hostage, and reconciling, the brothers finally recognize their brother, Joseph, and Joseph is reunited with them and with his father, Jacob. The brothers also hear from Joseph that he forgives them (45:1-15). Joseph says to them, "Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life" (45:5). They all, including their father, Jacob, and their children, move to Egypt. Jacob later dies. Before his death Jacob requested to be buried back in Canaan. His final wishes were fulfilled. After the burial, everyone returned back to Egypt with Joseph. Surely all the drama of the Joseph cycle should be over, but it isn't and this is where we pick up in today's passage. Before turning to God's word for us this day, let us first **PRAY. READ.**

I have never preached on this particular text before today. I think the reason why is that Joseph makes forgiveness sound easy and romantic, and it is not. Forgiveness is very, very hard. It's difficult to offer and to receive forgiveness. "There is something satisfying about reciting to yourself or to others the grievances, big and small, that justify your righteous anger. And there is always fuel for that fire of anger and bitterness. It would be great if it was just me and Jesus, but I have to deal with you and you have to deal with me, and again, it is difficult to forgive" (Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, workingpreacher.org). It is much easier to lick our wounds and pick at the scab than it is to allow them to breathe and heal. Why is it that we're so stubborn and prefer the

bleeding over the healing? I've been thinking about a lot about what we do with our hurt and our wounds. We look to the Bible for an instruction manual on forgiveness, but it's not as simple as a 1, 2, 3. I know for me- I have a few wounds that need healing but for some reason, I really struggle to move on and forgive these individuals or systems for the hurt they have caused. I think Joseph, along with Jesus, offers us some food for thought here.

This pattern of family drama and dysfunction, especially among brothers, is prominent in the Book of Genesis, starting with Cain and Abel and ending with Joseph and his brothers. Regardless of whether Joseph's brothers are lying or not, Joseph's brothers are afraid that now that their father is gone, their powerful brother, Joseph, will retaliate. They beg for forgiveness, even though Joseph has already forgiven them a few chapters ago- they beg not with their own voices, no, they co-opt the voice of their dead father. Joseph sees the ways of his own personal story and that of his family are wrapped up in the stories of God's relationship with Israel, and he chooses forgiveness rather than revenge or retaliation. We must not forget though that "forgiveness is costly. It demands repentance and it should not be rushed. Forgiveness goes hand in hand with issues of justice. Joseph's brothers talk about justice as a matter of simple reciprocity- an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Joseph changes this perspective and offers a new model of justice by way of forgiveness. For us, as for Joseph and his brothers, forgiveness never comes without weeping" (Claudio Carvalhaes, *Feasting on the Word*).

In 2009 I had the honor of directing a conference in Montreat, NC for over 1000 college students. One of the speakers that January weekend was the late Congressman John Lewis. He told us about the Freedom Ride and all that took place. One particular story he shared took place in Rock Hill, SC, where my maternal grandparents lived. Representative Lewis and a white guy, Al Bigelow, were sharing a Greyhound bus seat when they pulled into the bus station in Rock Hill on May 9th 1961. That was a no-no as whites and blacks weren't to sit together. Both Lewis and his seat companion were beaten and Lewis was badly injured, left for dead, laying in a pool of his own blood. Fast forward 48 years in late January/early February of 2009 when Edwin Wilson called and asked to meet with the congressman in his office in DC. It was there that Wilson, the man who had badly beaten Lewis that day in Rock Hill, asked for his forgiveness, and Lewis gave it to him. When Wilson asked, "Will you forgive me?", he began to weep, as did Lewis. They embraced and called one another "brother." When asked about this reconciliation, Lewis said, Wilson's in-person apology-which followed an apology he made in a Jan. 24 article in The Herald-is not only important to Rock Hill and South Carolina, but all around the country. The spirit of the cause for civil rights always was love and redemption, never malice or hate. Hate is too much of a burden to bear" ([link](#)). Don't we wish that we all could realize this sooner rather than later?! What do we do with our wounds?

"It would have been easier for Joseph's brothers if Joseph had beaten them first or had made them his slaves for the rest of their lives. They

may have understood that better, because that is how the world works. Crime and punishment. Retaliation and revenge. But Joseph did not see it that way. He was nobody's victim. When he looked at his life, he did not see a series of senseless tragedies. He saw a lighted path" (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*). Yet, this is another reason why I struggle with this text- vs. 20. Joseph says to his brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." I struggle with the word "intended" here because it can lead quickly to some conclusions and ways of thinking about God that I do not like. My former Old Testament professor, the late Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann, talks about the tension built into the story of Joseph and his brothers. "There are two very real dimensions to it. First, real human jeopardy. Real betrayal. Real wounds. Real grief. Real famine. Real weeping. And second, real divine faithfulness. Real rescue. Real blessing. Real healing. Real food. Each reality depends on the other." "All by itself the human situation looks pretty bleak. We do terrible things to each other. Our fear and our greed make monsters out of us. Nations that are not at war with other nations are at war within themselves, and the battle goes on inside each one of us. But jumping from that to absolute certainty about God's plan is not the answer, not all by itself. Because all by itself, that conviction ignores human suffering. It turns into a kind of religious romanticism that sees only what it wants to see and discounts the rest of human experience. Mortal pain and doubt have no place in this scheme, except as failures of faith. Can you imagine someone leaning down over the edge of the pit while the brothers are busy bargaining with the slave traders and yelling, 'Don't worry, Joseph, everything will

turn out just fine in the end”? How is that ever comforting? Clichés and platitudes like this irritate me to no end. “I know they are true. That is not the problem. The problem is how they are so often said, by people well-meaning people who smile knowingly and pat you on the arm while tears roll down your face. More often I feel dismissed” (Taylor). When my maternal grandmother died, I remember how much I despised the receiving line- not because I didn’t want to see people who loved my grandmother but because people didn’t know what to say so they filled my ear with platitudes like “God needed another angel.”

And what does that say of God? God Almighty doesn’t need any more angels. God doesn’t live in the sky. God lives right in the midst of our good and bad choices. God gives us the freedom to make them. Either way, God is still there. I like how preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says it. “God is committed to us and to working through us, which is what divine providence is all about. Contrary to what most of us have been taught, it is not about God’s will overriding our own. It is more like a dance, that totally mysterious dance that takes place between God’s freedom and our freedom, between God’s will and our own. In this dance, it is not God’s job to keep bad things from happening. They do happen. Brothers turn against brothers. People are bought and sold. Famine devastates the land. God’s job is not to prevent these things from happening. God’s job is to stay present in them and to keep on being God, creating whole worlds out of total chaos, breathing life into piles of dust, taking the unfathomable wreckage of our lives and making something fine out of them in spite of us. Because that is who God is.”

You see what Joseph's brothers had not reckoned on was the intent of the God of Israel. "God is like one of those genius sculptors who can make art out of anything. Nothing is too bent to be used- not even tragedies, not even bad decisions, not even plain human meanness. 'You meant evil against me,' said Joseph to his brothers, 'but God meant it for good.' Again, this does not mean that God caused the evil in order to produce good. While the brothers act proactively to accomplish one thing, God responds to their action so it ultimately accomplishes something different- something redemptive rather than destructive" (Timothy B. Cargal, *FWW*). The richer proclamation here is "What they (the brothers) did was evil. God did not allow their evil to have the final word. Joseph could keep his brothers permanently bound to what they did. Instead, he refuses to become what was done to him. The wound is real. Forgiveness does not erase the past. God can create a larger future larger than the injury. Grace does not call evil good. Grace refuses to let evil determine what comes next. Forgiveness is not allowing the wound to consume us.

Yes, forgiveness is very hard and forgiveness is at the very core of our call to Christian discipleship. Remember in last week's story in Matthew's Gospel (ch. 18) when Peter asked Jesus how many times we're to forgive those who sin against us- seven times? And Jesus answered, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy seven times" (18:21-22). "It is in salvation that forgiveness lives. It lives in the forgiveness that God extends to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It's

in the forgiveness that we then extend to our siblings in Christ” (Coffman). Jesus never promised easy; he promised to never leave us. So let us take courage and trust in the steadfast love of God. The late Congressman John Lewis and Edwin Wilson and countless other saints teach us by their example what it means to follow a Savior who forgave his executioners from the cross and to forgive our trespassers as they forgive us. What will we do with our wounds? Will we follow Jesus’ lead and instructions to both offer and receive forgiveness, thus allowing healing and new life, or will we stay stuck in our pain, anger, guilt, shame and bitterness, licking our wounds? Amen.