

Genesis 45:3-11, 15, Luke 6:27-38, Epiphany 7C, 2/20/22
Pastor Ellen Schoepf

There have been times in my life when I have truly struggled with forgiveness. And, when I take time to do some real introspection and self-examination, I realize there are still times when I struggle with forgiveness, maybe even daily. So, as I studied today's readings, they tend to bite a bit because they address what it **means** to **forgive**.

Our Old Testament reading tells us about Joseph. Now, anytime I hear this section of the Joseph saga, I cannot help but remember the scene in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* when Joseph reveals to his brothers who he really is. It becomes a powerful scene of forgiveness and ultimately reconciliation. Anyway, if you remember the story, Joseph's brothers horrifically sell him into slavery. Once in Egypt, he faces false accusation and imprisonment. Then, years later he astonishingly **forgives** his brothers. He forgives them for sending him into years of hardship and says, "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."

In our second reading, Paul writes to the Corinthians and talks about seeds and resurrection. He says seeds must die before new life can grow

and reminds his readers that we cannot know ahead of time what God will do with the perishable seeds we sow into the ground. I think Paul's message connects to forgiveness. When we forgive, we let something go, we let something die, and it creates in **us** newness of life. Truthfully, to be whole, we need to "die" to **everything** that hinders new life, and trust that God will transform our dishonor and weakness into new life.

And then, in our reading from Luke, Jesus continues his "Sermon on the Plain" with teachings so blunt, countercultural, and challenging, we hardly know what to do with them. He says, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and if anyone takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. **Forgive, and you will be forgiven.**"

After studying these readings, I found myself asking, what can we say about forgiveness? When we look at the bitterness, divisiveness, and hatred in our culture, in a society that seems focused on anger and retribution, what can we say about forgiveness that has meaning for us?

I think we need to begin by saying what forgiveness is NOT.

Forgiveness is **not** denial. It is **not** pretending that an offense doesn't matter, or that a wound doesn't hurt. Forgiveness is **not** acting as if things don't have to change, and it is **never** about allowing ourselves to be abused and mistreated because, as some would say, "God wants us to forgive and forget." No. That is **not** what forgiveness is about.

Secondly, forgiveness is **not** a detour or a shortcut. Yes, Christianity insists on forgiveness. But it calls us **first** to mourn, to lament, to burn with zeal, and to hunger and thirst for justice. Forgiveness works hand-in-hand with the difficult work of repentance and transformation. In other words, forgiveness is **not** about responding to systemic evil with passive acceptance or unexamined complicity. No, because God desires justice.

Thirdly, forgiveness is **not** instantaneous, not if we are honest. Forgiveness is a process. It is a messy, non-linear process that can leave us feeling healed up and free one minute and bleeding out of every pore in our body the next. In my experience, no one who says the words "I forgive you" escapes this messy process, and no one who struggles extra hard to forgive for reasons of temperament, situation, or trauma should feel that they're less godly or spiritual than those who don't. If you read the whole

story of Joseph, you find out that before Joseph forgave his brothers, he wrestled with a strong desire to scare and shame them. In fact, he *did* scare and shame them. Forgiveness was a process Joseph had to work through. He had to move slowly and painfully, over time, to reach the point at which he could forgive. There was no cathartic moment when the hurts of his past slipped off his back and rolled away. There was only life, lived one complicated, layered day and experience at a time.

Joseph was created for goodness, just like each of us. And just as Joseph experienced hurt, when we experience the good world being ripped away from us in any way, it is appropriate, it is human and even healthy, to react with horror. One of the great gifts of Christianity is that it takes sin and sin's consequences seriously. Sin wounds. Sin breaks. Sin echoes down the ages through families and systems. And so, forgiveness isn't an escalator. It is more like a spiral staircase. We circle around, again and again, trying to create distance between the pain we've suffered and the new life we seek, and slowly our perspective changes. Slowly, the ground of our pain falls away, and slowly we **rise** to new life.

So, if forgiveness is NOT denial, NOT a detour, and NOT something that quickly takes place, what is forgiveness? What is Jesus asking of us

when he tells us to love, bless, pray, give, lend, do good, withhold judgment, extend mercy, and turn the other cheek?

Nora Gallagher writes, "Forgiveness is a way to unburden oneself from the constant pressure of rewriting the past." Wow! Think about that. Forgiveness is really a gift we give **ourselves**. Henri Nouwen writes, "Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly, and so we need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. Forgiveness is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family."

Forgiveness is **choosing** to love instead of living a life of resentment. You see, if we are consumed with our own pain, if we make injury and hurt our identity, if we insist on weaponizing our so-called well-deserved anger as we interact with people who hurt us, it is like drinking poison, and the poison will kill us long before it does anything to our abusers. To choose forgiveness is to release ourselves from the tyranny of bitterness. It is to give up our frantic longing to be justified by anyone other than God.

Forgiveness is something that transforms **us** and transforms our way of **seeing**. When Joseph forgives his brothers, he reframes the horrible events of his life to include the **redemptive** work of God. He says,

“*God* sent me before you to preserve life.” To be clear: this does NOT mean that God *willed* Joseph’s brothers to abuse and abandon him. Abuse is **never** God’s will or plan for any person in this world. Rather, what Joseph is saying is that God is always and everywhere in the business of taking our worst experiences, working through them, and transforming them into wholeness and blessing within our lives. Because God is **with** us and God is in the story, we can rest assured that God **will** bring forth new life. There will be another turn, another path, and **more grace**. As we think about Lent beginning next week, we see how true this is as God transforms Jesus’ death on a cross and brings forth resurrected life.

When we forgive, we forgive out of God’s amazing abundance of grace to us, and **we** become changed. We become **freed** from bondage and God works to bring forth new life. I love the way Nadia Bolz Weber describes this aspect of forgiveness. She writes:

Maybe retaliation or holding onto anger about the harm done to me doesn’t actually combat evil. Maybe it feeds it. Because in the end, if we’re not careful, we can actually absorb the worst of our enemy, and at some level, start to become them. So, what if forgiveness, rather than being a pansy way to say, “It’s okay,” is actually a way of wielding bolt-cutters, and snapping the chains that link us? What if it’s saying, “What you did was so *not* okay, I refuse to be connected to it anymore.” Forgiveness is about being a **freedom fighter**. And free people are dangerous people. Free people **aren’t** controlled by the **past**. Free people laugh more than others. Free people see beauty

where others do not. Free people are not easily offended. Free people are unafraid to speak truth to stupid. Free people are not chained to resentments. And *that's* worth fighting for.

Today, Jesus is again giving us a word that brings healing, wholeness, transformation, and **liberation** as he teaches about forgiveness. Jesus is always calling us to forgive so that we loosen the chains that bind us, and live into God's transformational, life-giving word.