

Genesis 50:15-21 (NRSV)**pg. 48, OT, Pew Bible**

¹⁵Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" ¹⁶So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, ¹⁷'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." ¹⁹But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. ²¹So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word...

No Future Without Forgiveness

As we have been walking through this worship series on the theme of forgiveness, one reoccurring word that we keep bumping into is the word hope. Hope is a transcendent word. Hope is a word that looks to the future but is rooted and grounded in the present. Hope says that there is another way, a new possibility, a fresh opportunity, and challenges us to live into these dreams that they might actually become our reality. The Bible is essentially a book of hope. The Bible is a hope-inebriated love story that grounds us in the mercy and grace of our Eternal Parent. The stories within the Bible point us beyond ourselves toward what Jesus calls the Kingdom of God. The prophets direct us toward this new world, a world beyond the suffering and the struggle, reminding the poor and the oppressed that they are important, that God has seen and understands their plight, and that their poverty and their bondage will not be the last word. The apostolic witness found in the epistles of Paul and others in the New Testament suggest that, while struggle seems to be part and parcel to human existence, there is more to life than just entropy and pain. The Bible begins with a creation story that reminds us that all that God has created is blessed. The creation story tells us that everything is both sacred and intricately related, each piece of the divine puzzle connected and important to the larger picture on the canvass of the universe. And the Bible ultimately concludes with John of Patmos' hope-filled vision of a new heaven and a new earth, a place known more by what is not there than what is: a place devoid of tears and pain, darkness and despair, apathy and self-loathing.

And yet, we also discover in the stories of Holy Scripture that hope cannot become reality without the hard work of forgiveness. As we have just heard from the last chapter of the Book of Genesis, without forgiveness, the story of God's people would have abruptly ended with an

act of vengeance and retribution. Instead of the possibility of a gracious and hopeful future, the story of God's people would have ended in bloodshed and violence—the repetitive cycle of retribution leaving us dying and despairing in a gaping void of mutually-assured destruction. Abel's voice would continue to cry out from the grave while hapless humanity slowly trudges under the crushing weight of Cain's shame.

The Old Testament patriarch Joseph understood the necessity of forgiveness in closing the door on a painful past to open the door to a hopeful, promising future. Joseph was a dreamer—the eleventh of twelve brothers. He was also his father's favorite son which drew the ire and resentment of his older brothers to the point that they could wish him dead. In the end, they did not murder him but did something almost as reprehensible: they sold him into slavery and reported him dead to his parents. This all transpired when Joseph was seventeen years old. For the next thirteen years, Joseph lived as a slave in Egypt. At times, he found favor with his superiors and began to rise from his lowly status. At other times he was maliciously vilified and treated with contempt. Thirteen years is a long time to potentially build up walls of hate and resentment. But just when Joseph was at his lowest point, rotting in an Egyptian prison cell, things suddenly changed. In a dramatic reversal of fortunes, the favored son, unjustly treated and counted as dead, was exalted by Pharaoh and given the job of administrating the entire kingdom.

If this were a conventional rags-to-riches story it would end here, and the final credits would roll across the screen. But this story is not really about Joseph, rather it is about his family from which an entire people would evolve. So, the story continues until nine years later when a severe drought would bring Joseph's starving brothers to Egypt, seeking food and shelter. The tables had indeed turned. Now Joseph had the power and the means to exact his revenge. Instead, Joseph forgives his brothers, provides for their families, and saves the descendants of Abraham. Joseph's forgiveness provides Israel with a future.

Nevertheless, the guilt-racked brothers are still fearful of Joseph. They are convinced that, as soon as their father passes, Joseph will take up arms against them. They inhabited the world of paybacks, a place where the strong intimidates the weak and where fear is both a means of manipulating your enemy and the specter that haunts one's own dark dreams. In the world of paybacks, the first order of business when gaining power is to exact revenge upon one's enemies. Make them pay. Had Joseph played according to the rules of this game, he and his brothers would have fed into dysfunction and despair. A legacy of retaliation. An inheritance of reprisal. A bequest of bitterness. So, we enter this story this morning at a pivotal moment. Will there be vengeance, or will there be forgiveness? Fortunately for his brothers and their eventual descendants, Joseph did not go from prisoner to prince only to be once again

imprisoned in the dead-end cycle of revenge. Instead, he said, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.”

You see, without forgiveness, the story never moves on. We never get out of the book of Genesis if Joseph doesn't do the hard work of offering forgiveness to his brothers. The seed of Abraham falters if Joseph doesn't draw the proverbial line in the sand and say enough is enough. The hate stops here. The resentment ends now. For the sake of our family and for the sake of God's hopes for the world, I forgive you. Notice that Joseph doesn't not say “Oh, it was nothing.” He never denies the pain his brothers caused him by selling him into bondage and the grief that his parents had to bear upon hearing the lie that their son was killed by a wild beast. Here's the beauty of this story. Joseph doesn't move forward in forgiveness by calling injustice justice or evil good. Joseph names how he has been wronged but chooses to forgive by reconciling with his brothers and entrusting the matter of justice to the hands of God. In fact, the visionary Joseph can see how God is never bound by evil and how God was even able to use the evil that God did not cause to work towards a redemptive end. Joseph remembered the wrong that had been done to him—thirteen years of slavery—but decided that, for the sake of the family, for the sake of the world, and for the sake of what God can do despite our evil deeds, it was time to offer forgiveness. Joseph did not forgive and forget. Joseph forgave and remembered. But as he remembered, he simultaneously released his brothers from their moral debt and freed the entire family to discover reconciliation.

Looking at the totality of Scripture, it is here in the fiftieth chapter of Genesis we are finally introduced to the wonderfully rich and liberating word “forgiveness.” Verse seventeen introduces that very word—“Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.” This theme will be repeated throughout the long story the Bible tells. It will be a recurrent theme of the ancient psalmists and prophets. It will be found in the Sermon on the Mount and heard in the Lord's Prayer. It will be present at the cross and the Resurrection. And from there, the apostles will take the message of forgiveness to the world. It all starts right here, with a dreamer named Joseph.

To allow the feelings of unforgiveness and resentment to fester in our hearts is to walk a dangerous path. In doing so, we allow our identity to be formed by the injustice we've experienced in a way that forever shapes our future. In looking for the opportunity to be cruel to the person who was cruel to us, one becomes a cruel person—one becomes the very thing one hates. This is how evil perpetuates itself. This is how evil moves from host to host until the whole world lies in its power. Evil is only defeated when someone absorbs the blow and forgives. Absorbing the blow without retaliation by exercising the option to forgive is not weakness or acquiescence with injustice. Rather, it is taking up one's cross and following Christ himself. It is following Jesus to and through Calvary where evil makes its last stand in the

injustice of the cross and is finally crushed under the weight of infinite love on Easter morning. Forgiveness is not weakness; it is the power of God—the power of God to overcome evil by depriving evil of a host for retaliation.

The question is, do we really believe? Do we dare believe in Jesus' radical ideas of enemy-love and infinite forgiveness? Without this kind of love and this kind of forgiveness, we find ourselves adrift in the ever whirling and churning vortex of vengeance. As Christians, we are called not only to believe in Christ himself, but to also embrace and believe in his ideas. The future we look for, the future we long for, the future that would free us from the unending repetition of the painful past, lies in our capacity to move beyond the past through the liberating practice of faith-based forgiveness. It is forgiveness that creates the future.

Blessing & Benediction

Forgiveness is not weakness;

it is the power of God—

the power of God to overcome evil

by depriving evil of a host for retaliation.

May the strength of God challenge you to embark on the journey of forgiveness and reconciliation.

May the light of Christ guide you through the wilderness of resentment and hate.

And may the hope of the Holy Spirit bring you at last into the bright future of God's goodness and grace.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **Amen.**