

Genesis 50:15-21 Pastor Bill Uetricht 9/11/11 13 Pentecost

For intrigue, suspense, murder, betrayal, stories of dysfunctional families, or relationship struggles, who needs *Days of our Lives* and its predictability, *Jersey Shores* and its triviality, or *Dallas* and its shallowness, when you can have *The Book of Genesis* and its antiquity and its profundity. You really ought to read the *Book of Genesis*. It is full of all kinds of drama, replete with stories about weird families like yours and mine, families that can't get along, family members who plot against each other, struggle with themselves, and even wrestle with God.

Today in our first lesson we get the end of one of the most compelling stories in Genesis, the story of Joseph and his brothers. In some ways, today's story seems like it should be a part of a play, even a great musical. I don't know. I think I can even come up with a name for it. How about something like . . . *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*? And honestly, I have a feeling that this story will really appeal to American audiences. They like happy ending stories, stories where it appears that everything comes out in the wash. They like it when the bad guys repent, the good guys offer forgiveness, and everybody lives happily ever after.

There is some evidence that the Joseph narrative may have come into existence for Israel during the reign of King Solomon, a time when, at least initially, Israel had it good. This time was a time of great economic prosperity. And you know as well I do, that when times are good often the stories about life are clear, lacking ambiguity. When times are good, it is easier to tell stories that have happy endings and easily digestible moral points. When times are good it is easier to have stories in which everything comes out in the wash.

And that is, at least it appears to be, what the Joseph story gives us. I know that most of you know the story. Joseph was the favorite son of his Dad, Jacob. And as a consequence, his brothers hated him. They threw him into a pit trying to do away with him. Some travelers come by and pick him up and take him into Egypt where eventually he makes it big. He becomes the head of the Department of Agriculture and has a great deal of control over the food of the land. His brothers end up in a famine situation back at home and, you could guess it, have to go to Egypt to find food, a reality that gets them reconnected to their little brother whom they tried to kill. They need food, but they must deal with their brother, who now has control over them.

Today's first lesson speaks of the final struggle that the brothers have with their big boss brother whom they are afraid may continue to hold a grudge toward them and seek revenge against them. Joseph chooses not to hold that grudge and promises to provide for them and their children. He offers forgiveness. Everybody cries. And we get tingles, knowing that human beings can rise above their situations, family members can be reconciled, and forgiveness can reign.

First of all, I have to admit today that it is an amazing irony that on the tenth anniversary of 9/11 all of the lessons are about forgiveness. There is no way that I can get around it. The Joseph story is saturated with forgiveness. The psalm says that "the Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Paul in Romans asks, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister or despise [him or her]?" And then Jesus in Matthew is overt in his claim that God is so amazingly generous to us that we need to be gracious and forgiving to others who owe us nothing compared to what we owe God. He is so

strong in his calling us to live lives of forgiveness that he offers a threat to us if we aren't living them.

Couldn't we have come up with some better readings for September 11th —readings about justice being done to our enemies, vindication being given to the righteous? This heart-warming, spine-tingling, happily-ever-after story in Genesis about Joseph and his brothers seems a little cheap to me on the anniversary of one of the toughest and most evil days in American history. The story seems a little trite, a little too clear cut, too unrealistic for people who now are too well acquainted with the horrific side of reality.

But you know, as you take a closer look at the text from Genesis today, you might find that it is more complex, more realistic, more compelling than an initial glance might indicate. I had to wonder when I read the first part of the story if what is going on is additional manipulation on the part of the brothers. Nowhere in the Book of Genesis do we hear that Jacob, the father, had found out what the brothers had done to Joseph. And nowhere are we told that he gave instructions to the brothers to ask Joseph to forgive the crime of the brothers. Maybe this is just more plotting and scheming on the part of the brothers. Maybe they know if they quote their Dad, with whom Joseph was quite close, that Joseph will have his heart softened and will respond to their wish. There is an alternative reading to one word in today's reading that is quite telling to me. The line "so they *approached* Joseph" can also read "so they *commanded* Joseph." Maybe these brothers aren't as groveling and repentant as we think they are. Maybe they are still conniving as they come to Joseph today. Maybe this is a more complex story than we realize.

For me, the complexity can also be seen in Joseph's response to the brothers who appeal to him not as members of his family, but as "servants of the God of your father." They ask for forgiveness, and interestingly, what Joseph says is: "Am I in the place of God?" Could it be that what he is asking is whether *he* is the one who can forgive? God, maybe the assumption is, is the forgiver. After his little question, Joseph is quick to focus on the activity of *God*: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good."

You know, when it comes to forgiveness I think we believe that it is a matter of *our* mustering up enough warmth for people who have harmed us. We think it is a matter of downplaying what they did to us. It's acting as if the past was never very significant to us in the first place, acting as if the conniving of others that continues even when they seem to be repentant can be overlooked easily. The reality of being human is so much more complex. And, I would suggest, the reality of forgiveness is so much more complex.

Forgiveness is not a matter of pretending that the harm done to us wasn't great. What was done to thousands of people ten years ago in this nation was horrible. It was inexplicable. What was done to many of us by many people—our parents, our kids, our ex-wives and husbands, our kids' ex-spouses—was not okay. True forgiveness comes to grips with the gravity of the pain caused by others. What is there to forgive if there were no harm done? What Joseph's brothers did to him was miserable. Joseph's forgiveness must come to grips with that miserable-ness. I am struck by the fact that the writer of the Joseph story takes his time in getting us to the forgiveness scene. There are a lot of shenanigans--some orchestrated by Joseph--that take place in the

latter part of the story, before we reach the reconciliation scene. Maybe forgiveness is more of a process than we realize.

And maybe in some very real way forgiveness is not ours to give. Maybe the question “Are we in the place of God?” is the right question for us to ask ourselves. Maybe forgiveness is God’s business. Jesus seems to be suggesting this in his parable about the debtor who owed the king 150,000 years of wages. No doubt, we are to think of this king as God. No doubt we are to realize that God’s forgiveness is massive. That’s why it doesn’t make much sense for the man who owes so much to the king not to forgive the few pennies that are owed to him. God is a big-time forgiver. Forgiveness is God’s business.

Perhaps my dealing with the folks who have harmed me, our dealing with the folks who have harmed us is not a matter of me trying to drum up within me a soft spot for them. It is more a matter of me trusting them to the forgiveness of God, a forgiveness that is always bigger and always more reliable than what I can muster up. It is that overwhelming forgiveness of God that I must focus on for myself and for others. Let’s face it; sometimes *my* debt is quite large. Sometimes *I* really have violated the lives of others. And yes, sometimes *they* have really violated my life or our life together. The violations are big, but the grace of God is bigger. God’s forgiveness is bigger than it all. Why then would I want to live with a heart that is marked by never-ending bitterness or anger? Why would we want our country to be shaped by vindictiveness, fear, or war talk? I am not served by the bitterness. We are not served by the bitterness.

And what’s more, and trust me I don’t say this with any flippancy, who knows what God can do with pain and evil? Joseph’s statement that “even though you intended it for evil, God intended it for good”

can be an easy way around some very tough things, can trivialize the magnitude of pain inflicted upon human beings. Yet it also can remind us that pain and evil may indeed not be the final word about life and our relationships. God can weave God's purposes in spite of the pain and evil that we inflict on each other. If you don't believe that, glance at the cross. What could be more evil or more painful? Yet the church insists that the cross is the symbol of the greatest love ever known by the world. Pain and evil are not the final word in the realm of God. Trust that. Live it!