

Proper 15 A
Genesis 45:1-15
August 20, 2023

“As We Forgive”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

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. Is my father still alive?’ But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come closer to me.’ And they came closer. He said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; God has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, “Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.” And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down

here.' Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

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A lot has happened since we met Joseph last week during Children's Time. I'm guessing that many of you are familiar with Joseph's story, or at least the Broadway version of it by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. For those who aren't familiar or who need a very brief refresher, Joseph was the favorite son of his father Jacob. Jacob spoiled him and lavished him with gifts, including a beautiful robe. His eleven brothers weren't thrilled. To make matters worse, Joe was a dreamer and he told his brothers about his dreams – they always seemed to involve his brothers bowing at his feet. Fed up, the brothers plotted. Initially planning to kill him, they settled on taking Joseph's coat, covering it in blood to convince their father he was dead, and selling him to slavers.

Ending up in Egypt, Joe worked for a wealthy man named Potiphar. Everything went well until Potiphar's wife took an interest in Joe and he rejected her advances. A carefully concocted story landed him in hot water with Potiphar and then a hot jail cell. Even in jail, though, things went well for Joe and he was promoted to lead inmate. A couple of his fellow inmates started having dreams and Joe interpreted them. When his analysis proved correct, word of Joseph's abilities made it to Pharaoh, who was also plagued by disturbing dreams. He sent for Joseph at once. When Joe revealed that Pharaoh's dreams portended seven years of plenty and seven years of famine, Pharaoh elevated Joe to his right-hand man in order to prepare the nation for the hardship to come.

When famine struck, Joseph's brothers, still in Canaan, learned of Egypt's vast grain stores and determined to go there to buy. Standing before the governor of all Egypt, the brothers were star-struck and didn't recognize their own brother, but Joseph knew and through some trickery of his own,

he learned that they were repentant for what they did to him and the suffering they put their father through. And that's where today's reading picks up: the grand revelation of Joe's true identity, the tearful family reunion, and the immigration of their clan to Egypt from Canaan, the land their family settled in during the time of their ancestor Abraham. The stage is now set for the great epic that will be the Exodus.

It's a heck of a story and there's a lot of sermon fodder there, but as I reread it again, one thing stuck out at me: forgiveness. I'm definitely not going to stand up here and say that the Joseph we read about was perfect, but his brothers really did put him through hell. Instead of the bitterness, resentment, and bile of holding on to his hurts and nursing his pain, Joe seemed to have an uncanny ability to let it go and move on – apparently thriving in all circumstances. And that's something I believe we can learn from.

Forgiveness is hard work. It can be hard to forgive others and it can be hard to forgive ourselves. While learning to do it is hard, not learning to opens us to a whole host of other challenges. In the case of Joe, had he held on to the pain and resentment he surely felt toward his brothers, would he have thrived in Potiphar's house? Had he held on to the pain and resentment he surely felt for Potiphar's slanderous wife, would he have thrived in prison? And if he'd failed to thrive at any of these crucial times, if he'd been unable to let it go and move on, would he have found himself at the right hand of Pharaoh to orchestrate the salvation of the Egyptian people and his family?

We are not Joseph. But our lives will be marked by similar crucial times where forgiveness, or the lack of it, will have a significant impact on where we'll go next and on where we'll ultimately end up. The choice, though, to forgive ourselves and to forgive others, belongs to us.

In addition to its potential for shaping the course of our lives, the ability to forgive has positive implications for our health and well-being. Mayo Clinic states that, "Forgiveness can lead to: healthier relationships,

improved mental health, less anxiety, stress and hostility, fewer symptoms of depression, lower blood pressure, a stronger immune system, improved heart health, [and] improved self-esteem.”¹ On the other hand, failing to forgive, according to Mayo, may “bring anger and bitterness into new relationships and experiences.” It also may cause us to “become so wrapped up in the wrong that [we] can't enjoy the present; to become depressed, irritable or anxious; [to] feel at odds with [our] spiritual beliefs, [and to] lose valuable and enriching connections with others.” In short, forgiveness is good for our health and our relationships, while failing to forgive is decidedly not.

I do know that forgiving is one of those things that are easier said than done. Sometimes, the pain, grief, or anger we feel with ourselves or with someone else sticks with us like cement, weighing us down and tripping us up. We can't seem to set it aside and it's too burdensome to carry forward. It can be helpful to remember that, according to the story, Joseph was 17 years old when his brothers sold him and in his late 30s when they finally reunited. He'd had lots of time to work through his pain and grief and anger.

Forgiveness can be a slow and arduous process of releasing the grasp something has on us and letting it go. It can involve intense reflection, therapy, support, spiritual care, and the active choice to move on. And the choice to forgive doesn't mean that the offense is excused or forgotten and it may not result in the kind of happy reunion Joseph's family had. What it does mean, though, is that we're no longer bound by the offense, burdened by it, weighed down and held in place by it. Forgiveness frees us to keep moving forward. As it has been said, “Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.”²

May it be so with us. Amen.

¹ Mayo Clinic Staff. “Forgiveness: Letting go of grudges and bitterness,” MayoClinic.org: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/forgiveness/art-20047692>.

² Paul Boese