

3 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.

4 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. 5 And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7 God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. 9 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. 10 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. 11 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.'"

15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

FIRST READING: Luke 6:27-38

pg 64 NT

"But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29 If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. 30 Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.

32 "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. 35 But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

37 "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 38 give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

“A Good Measure, Running Over”

For centuries one of the favorite Bible stories has been the Joseph novella, the story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis. In order to consider the message that the Spirit might have for us today, we need to review the story briefly.

Our text picks up with Joseph as a grown man in Egypt. He was in Egypt because his brothers turned on him when he was a child and sold him into slavery. Their act, while heinous, was not hard to imagine however given Joseph’s arrogance, not to mention his favored status. If you went to Sunday School, you surely heard about Joseph and his coat of many colors. Or maybe you remember Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical, *“Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat”*. Well, that coat was given Joseph by his father, Jacob, and it caused his 11 brothers to become very envious because it distinguished Joseph as his father’s favorite. You may also have heard about Joseph’s habit of telling his brothers about his dreams, a typical one featured the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him! 11 stars...11 brothers. These things made them wild. When they’d had it with him, they threw him into a cistern and then sold him to slave traders who passed through Canaan on their way to Egypt. The brothers put blood on Joseph’s coat and told Jacob that he’d been eaten by wild animals. When Joseph arrived in Egypt he worked himself up from a slave to the head of his owner’s household. He ended up in prison, however, after he refused the advances his owner’s wife. While in prison, the chief jailer thought so highly of him that he put him in charge of the whole prison, and Joseph then used his dream-interpreting skills to interpret dreams of the other prisoners. Word got around about his gift such that later he was given the chance to get out of prison by interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh, himself. One particularly troubling dream that Joseph interpreted for Pharaoh was the coming of a famine in the land. Joseph was able to recommend to Pharaoh that food be gathered up to prepare for it. Joseph gave credit to the Lord: *“It is not me, God will give Pharaoh a favorable response,”* he said. This pleased Pharaoh so much that he put Joseph in charge of the whole project and gave him a position second only to himself. During the famine years, all the world came to Egypt to buy grain. They usually ended up meeting with Joseph to do this. And guess who came? Yes, Joseph’s brothers. And when they

appeared before Joseph, Joseph recognized them, but they did not recognize Joseph. Nor could the brothers ever have imagined that their brother who'd they sold into slavery was now the second most powerful person in Egypt. Joseph played them a while. First, he accused them of being spies. Then he hid some of the palace silver in their knapsacks and accused them of stealing. But he was moved by their attempt to protect their youngest brother, Benjamin. And when he couldn't stand it any longer, he burst into tears and told them who he was. "*I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?*," he asked. The brothers were too stupefied and terrified to speak. Joseph went on to FORGIVE their guilt. "*Don't be distressed,*" he told them. "*Don't be distressed (I love that) for God sent me before you to preserve life.*" Joseph showed them that he knew that God's divine hand had been on him all along. Then he told them to go, and get their father and, in fact, the whole family so that they could all live and prosper together.

Wow! It is indeed quite a story. It's a story full of intrigue, adventure, sex, humor and surprises ...all the stuff Hollywood knows that good stories are made of, but what makes it a good story for us is that it is the story of Luke 6, where we see Jesus' sermon on the Plain enacted. It is a story where Joseph, as a child of the Most High God, eventually did the hard, hard work of participating in the establishment the Kingdom of God, and, for all of us to see, modeled the way we identify ourselves as citizens too of that Kingdom....that is, he modeled the way we need be compassionate just as God is compassionate, the way we need be forgiving, just as God forgives. He exemplified the truth that without forgiveness, there can be no meeting of God and humanity.

How easy it would have been for Joseph to hate his enemies, to avenge the terrible wrong that had been done to him. He could have sent the brothers away. He could have had them killed, maybe by throwing them in a cistern, letting THEM starve to death. He could have cursed those who cursed him & hated those who hated him. He had the power. (repeat).

That's when compassion and forgiveness is the hardest you know...when the tables have been turned and we are the ones with power and the opportunity to exact revenge, WHEN we have the power to withhold the forgiveness that is now being sought by the ones who have hurt

us.¹ That's when forgiveness is the hardest. It also can be hardest when those we are needing to forgive are closest to us, whose betrayal is the most painful. It's hard to turn loose the pain. It is hard to turn loose of it, especially if it's become our identity, the new definition of who we are...the Wronged, the Hurt.² It's hard to forgive. It is hard, hard work to forgive.

But unforgiveness costs! Unforgiveness holds us captive, as in a prison wherein we spend enormous energy and time being angry, festering, stewing about whatever happened, considering the insult from every angle and going to great lengths to avoid exposing ourselves to it again. Forgiveness is hard, but unforgiveness eats at our insides. And it is exhausting. With unforgiveness we cannot have friends. With unforgiveness we cannot have family. With unforgiveness, we cannot have lasting marriages.

An Irish girl named Philomena became pregnant as a teenager in the early 1950s. Her father sent her to a convent where nuns took in unmarried pregnant girls. Harsh conditions were imposed on the girls there. The nuns blamed the girls for their predicament, and most of the nuns seemed completely without compassion. After giving birth, the young mothers had limited access to their children, but yet there was enough time to develop strong and deep bonds with them. However, the babies and toddlers were soon taken from their mothers and put up for adoption. More accurately, they were sold, to generate income for the convent. Philomena's son was sold to a wealthy American couple when he was three years old and she never saw him again. Finally, as an old woman, she tried to find her son with the help of a journalist. Eventually, Philomena and the journalist confronted the now quite elderly and frail nun who was responsible for much of the pain Philomena had suffered. Philomena turned to the nun and said, "Sister, I forgive you." The journalist was stunned. He said, "Just like that, you forgive her." Philomena shot back, "No, not just like that. This was hard for me." "Well," the journalist said, "I won't forgive her. I'm angry." Philomena looked at him. "That must be exhausting,"³

¹ Brent A Strawn. "Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany. Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture. In: Joel Green, Thomas Long, Luke Powery, Cynthia Rigby, eds. "Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship Yr C Vol 1 (Louisville: WJKP: 2018),256-7.

² Fred Craddock, quoted in John Buchanan. "The Hardest Thing of All. <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007032507.html> (accessed 2/22/19).

³ San Williams, "Community of the Unforgiven" <https://upcaustin.org/sermons/community-of-the-forgiven> (accessed 2/22/19).

Rev. Sam Wells (Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Field) says, *“Forgiveness doesn’t change the past, but it releases us from it. It doesn’t rewrite history. But it prevents our histories from asphyxiating us. Fundamentally, forgiveness transforms our past from an enemy to a friend....Forgiveness changes the past’s relationship to us. Now the past can accompany us, deepen us, teach us, train us. No longer do we hate it or curse it or resent it or begrudge it. Now we find acceptance, understanding, enrichment, even gratitude for it. This is the work of forgiveness. It’s about the transformation of the prison of the past and finding ourselves free, at peace, unchained and able to feel joy again.”*⁴

I will close by moving to the personal for a moment. Friends, I do not know the estrangements in your life, but I imagine that you have a few to deal with. We all do. And forgiveness is hard. It’s hard, hard work. But unforgiveness is a prison. Hatred and bitterness will eventually destroy you. Whatever then that you are holding on to, let it go today. “Reconciliation is not always possible or maybe not even advisable, but forgiveness is.”⁵

It may help if I suggest you consider that the person or persons who hurt you was also a wounded individual who acted out of their own history and circumstances. This may be the key that unlocks resentment and allows you to forgive.⁶ I don’t know. And understanding that forgiveness and reconciliation may not happen in the space of a day, or even sometimes years may also help. But most importantly, what will make it most possible is realizing that the Kingdom which the Most High God is building, the Kingdom that God, who calls us children, the Kingdom which hinges on forgiveness and of which we are citizens, this Kingdom is being brought by God’s Son THROUGH us, and not BY us! We are not doing the hard work alone. Just as Joseph was upheld always by the presence of the divine hand, Jesus is with us when loving our enemies and blessing those who hate us is seemingly impossible.

Jesus was forever walking up to people declaring, *“Your sins are forgiven,” “Go, and sin no more”*. In his last breath, when they’d nailed him to a cross and left him hanging there, when

⁴ Sam Wells, *“The forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting.”* <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-forgiveness-of-sins-and-the-life-everlasting/10099924> (accessed 2/22/19).

⁵ JoAnna Adams. *“God’s Providence and Human Plans”* http://morningsidepc.com/archive/s3.amazonaws.com/dfc_attachments/public/documents/1200330/S081405.pdf (accessed 2-23-19).

⁶ San Williams, *“Community of the Unforgiven.”*

his friends had run away and the soldiers were casting lots for his clothing, he said, “*Father, forgive them,*”. And on a level plain one day, he preached, “*Forgive, and you will be forgiven*”This is the One who is with us, helping us do the work of bringing the kingdom. And this is the One who promised that what forgiving love we give to others we will get back. “*A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap,*” he said. What this means is that whatever share of forgiveness we CAN offer, a Jesus-sized share of forgiveness will be given us in return.⁷ Brothers and sisters, fellow children of the Most High God, don’t be distressed. Don’t be distressed. It will be sufficient....

May the glory be his. Amen.

⁷ Jim Somerville, “*Radical Compassionism, a Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, Yr C*”. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WckOpLUhrbg> (accessed 2-23-19).