



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
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Looking at Joseph

Text: Genesis 45:1-15

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The story of Joseph and his brothers is a really long story in Genesis spanning a good 15 chapters. The biblical writers obviously thought it was a great and important story to include in the Bible and we can see why. It's a great story with lots of drama – dysfunctional families, betrayal, violence, lying, bad parenting, suspense – all ending in an awesome happy ending. Many of us have seen the movie on t.v. or the musical version of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat – some of us have seen it more than once too. I know that just in the time I've lived here, New Albany H.S. and Floyd Central High school have performed Joseph about 3 times between them. I saw them all and I saw it on Broadway in New York years ago too when David Cassidy played Joseph – now if you are under 30 years old you probably have no idea who David Cassidy or the Partridge Family is, but he used to be quite the teenage idol. Jacob has all these sons and they have different mothers and he doesn't even try to keep it a secret that he has a favorite son. He's not a great role model for a husband or for a father – actually if you think about it, the Bible doesn't really give us much help in how to be a good parent. Jacob's sons are jealous of Joseph and who could blame them really – the father claims him as his favorite and lets everyone know his mother is his favorite wife – I don't believe that multiple wives thing ever worked. Then Joseph makes it worse – instead of kissing up to his brothers or keeping quiet, he starts sharing his dreams about how one day he's going to be rich and famous and they'll all be groveling at his feet. All siblings annoy each other, but this sibling rivalry was beyond anything healthy considering what his brothers ended up doing to him. They are going to kill him and then instead they find out that they can sell him into slavery and make some money. So they do and then they go home and tell their father that he's dead. Joseph becomes a slave. We never hear anything about the brothers all those years – did they wonder how Joseph was doing? Did they ever feel badly for what they did? Did they have nightmares about it? Any kind of remorse? We don't know. We learn that Joseph went on is falsely put in jail, then he interprets the dreams of his fellow inmates who remember him when they get out and pass his name on to the Pharaoh. Joseph helps Pharaoh out by interpreting his dreams and the next thing you know Joseph is a big honcho in Egypt. One of the interpretations Joseph made was that there would be a famine across the land only after 7 very fruitful years so he becomes invaluable as he organizes the whole process of stocking up food to be prepared for the famine. The passage that was read today is the dramatic conclusion to a long story. Joseph has been on a long journey, geographically and emotionally through all kinds of ups and downs until he ends up as Pharaoh's right hand man. Then comes the great irony as his brothers end up having to bow and scrape

before him asking for help. Joseph hides a cup in his brother Benjamin's sack and accuses him of stealing and threatens then to send him off to prison. It could be that Joseph was looking to see how the brothers would respond – would someone stand up for Benjamin – which Judah does – trying to convince Joseph to let him go. Is he looking to see if they've changed, if they care for anyone but themselves. Or is he just enjoying a little bit of revenge, making them sweat it out a bit before he tells them who he is? We don't really know that either. But what we do know is that finally Joseph can bear it no longer. He tells all the Egyptian officials to leave and then comes the best part of the story, the part in which you want to cheer - he reveals his true identity to his brothers. The Bible says that he is so moved that he weeps so loudly that the attendants outside of the room hear him. He hugs all of his brothers and continues to cry out loud. There is no mention of the brothers apologizing or showing any remorse whatsoever. Joseph's forgiveness clearly seems to be apart from any repentance on the brother's part. They didn't ask him for forgiveness – they didn't even know it was him. They hadn't tried to track him down to make amends or anything. And Joseph acts graciously to them and responds to them with generosity and with love. Joseph talks about how it all worked out like it was supposed to and that God had a hand in it all. The problem with believing that everything is God's will is that if you believe that God plans out every detail, then we aren't responsible for the bad we do. But another way of looking at the drama of Joseph and the brothers is to take seriously the actions of humans and the actions of God. God didn't plan that the brothers do evil and attempt to get rid of Joseph. They are fully accountable for their sin. On the other hand, we can celebrate the way God is able to use the situation to bring life and reconciliation into this family of Jacob. That way, as Walter Brueggemann, a U.C.C. theologian, says, "Neither the freedom of the people nor the gracious sovereignty of God is canceled. In our lives we cannot avoid being accountable for actions which hurt and give pain to others whether on a personal level or on a global level. However, it is the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit which can overcome our sin, bring new life and possibilities from all situations. There is a myth about a man who made Persian Rugs and it goes that to pass the trade along, he taught his sons. When they were working as his apprentice, the father had a pattern for the rug, when the apprentice made a mistake, the father didn't undo the mistake, rather he adapted the pattern. What a great image of God.

I think it is hard for us to think of God as forgiving everything we do – many times we are hardest on ourselves and can't imagine God truly forgiving us, but as difficult as that is, perhaps we have an even harder time understanding what it means to forgive others.

Does forgiveness mean that we no longer hold the person responsible for what they did – forgive and forget and go along in the relationship as if nothing ever happened?

Does forgiveness mean that if the person asks for forgiveness and shows they are truly sorry, then we forgive them?

Does forgiveness mean that a person has to ask for forgiveness, show remorse and then over time prove that they are changing their ways.

To say that the Bible says that we should forgive others and so it is clear is not really true. The Bible does talk often about forgiveness, but I think it is anything but clear.

The Lord's Prayer simply says forgive – no conditions are mentioned, nothing. Jesus tells people they are forgiven and then usually says "Go and do not sin again" implying they need to change, but he forgives them before they change.

In the Joseph story, the brothers don't even ask for forgiveness, yet Paul tells the early churches that they must ask for forgiveness to receive it.

It seems like it matters what the thing is that we are forgiving too.

If I tell you that I will come to a meeting next Tuesday night and I forget, you will probably forgive me by forgetting about it and not harboring any ill feelings about the event.

If your spouse or partner is unfaithful to you, you might forgive them but it might take a lot of time and counseling and you might be watching to see if there is a true change of behavior.

The expectations with forgiveness are higher but staying in a relationship might still be possible.

If someone is abusive or kills a loved one, forgiveness might be more of a thing that you do for yourself to "let the pain go" realizing that a relationship with the person is no longer possible. I have a problem with people offering what I call "cheap forgiveness".

It's like someone does something horribly wrong and immediately the person says "I forgive them". I don't think Jesus' discussions of forgiveness mean that we can't hold people accountable and take time to forgive and sometimes stay away from someone if there is a chance that they will hurt us or someone else again.

I do believe though that while there are so many questions about what forgiveness is all about, one thing we are told is to love our enemies, to love those who hurt us.

Too often we think of love as some warm feeling, some kind of Pollyanna response to everyone, but true love might mean recognizing that we can care about someone or recognizing that we can pray for someone even if we have no intention of having them as a part of our life.

Loving sometimes means recognizing that the other person is loveable to God and is just as important to God as I am.

Loving people who do us wrong, even people who do evil things does not have to mean spending time with them.

Loving them might mean recognizing that they need help or recognizing that they are in pain, or recognizing that their chance for a good life is over because they need to be locked up so they can't hurt others.

I don't know if loving them is necessarily forgiveness, but it is true that we can choose to love others – love is a choice. When I was pregnant with Zachary, our youngest child, I remember being very seriously worried that there was no way that I would be able to love him as much as I loved our first son. I couldn't fathom it and then he was born and I realized what a gift God gives us to love in a capacity that we don't know we have.

How do we love the teacher who embarrassed us, or love the family member who lied to us, or love the ex-spouse who has tried to destroy the relationship we have with our children, or the friend who betrayed us?

How can we love our enemies – we can love them because love is not just about a feeling – it is a choice.

Love is the decision to do right even when we are wronged. Love is the decision to do good even when bad is done, to bless others even when we've been cursed, to forgive even when you are condemned, to care even when you are not cared for.

A lot of families have members who aren't speaking – sometimes about really stupid things and sometimes about really important things.

The divorce rate is awful and people get divorced sometimes over really stupid things without even trying to save the marriage and sometimes over really important things after working really hard to save the marriage.

Maybe sometimes forgiveness means realizing that what the other did was too harmful that it is not healthy or safe for you to be around them anymore and so instead of getting over it and

having them in your life, you choose to love them by praying for them, by wanting the best for them, by hoping that they change their life for the better, by recognizing that God loves them still. But most of the time, most injustices done to us are things that we need to get over, that we need to let go of by choosing to love the other person and forgive them as we would want to be forgiven and as we often need to be forgiven too. Most circumstances where people are not speaking to someone or always mad, holding grudges, never letting stuff go, - most of the time, they are things that we need to let go of or we become just as sinful by letting the hate rule our hearts.

Joseph wept loudly when he reconciled with his brothers – he forgave them the unthinkable, he buried his pride and his hate and anger - they made no moves to repent or to reconcile with him and yet all of them, especially Joseph experienced joy when Joseph decided, made the choice to take the high road.

Being right does not make you win, and it doesn't bring happiness – being forgiving and loving and full of grace – those things are what make us true winners – they re what make for true happiness – true joy.