

*Fretting and Forgetting*, February 18, 2001  
 Gen. 45: 3-11, 15: 50; 15-21; Lk. 6: 27-38  
 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany

## **INTRODUCTION**

What is the hardest thing you have to do in this service? Stay focused? Stay awake? Handle that dear little fidgeting child squirming beside you? Swallow some obscure doctrine that may have meant everything to a church father living in a desert in North Africa in the fourth century, but having no apparent connection to the pile of bills on your desk or the biopsy report you're sweating out?

My hunch is that the hardest thing we all have to do in common in this service comes early on when we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

## **THE TOUGH STUFF**

Jesus loves us all right and saves us from our sins to be sure (although we sometimes have a hard time explaining exactly how). He says a lot of wonderful things to us like, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest..."<sup>1</sup>

He makes other easy to take remarks. "In my Father's house are many mansions; I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself that where I am, there you may be also."<sup>2</sup>

But just when we're getting comfortable, wham! He has to go and say things like, "Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you...Forgive, and you will be forgiven."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 11: 28

<sup>2</sup> John 14: 2-3

<sup>3</sup> Luke 6: 27-28, 37b

That's pretty tough stuff, isn't it? And then there's that Responsive Reading text from Psalm 37. "Do not fret because of the wicked...do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices. Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret – it leads only to evil...The meek shall inherit the land..."<sup>4</sup> Last time I checked the meek were getting creamed.

What are we to make of all these apparently impossible commands? "Don't fret! Love your enemies! Forgive!"

We can't just turn off the fretting and turn on the forgiving like we turn off the cold water and turn on the warm. But the dynamic of ending the fretting and beginning the forgiving can work. I offer you as proof a case study of a certain man named Joseph.

### **A CASE STUDY – JOSEPH**

Joseph was one of 12 brothers, the 11<sup>th</sup> to be born. Think of it – he had 10 big brothers to contend with. On top of that, his family was what we call dysfunctional these days. His father, a man named Jacob, was a slippery character at best and a polygamist to boot. To put a good face on things, old Jacob had been brought up by a father named Isaac who was a bit of wimp. To make matters worse Jacob's father had nearly killed him – but I digress.

Jacob's mother was a real piece of work, playing favorite son with him big time at the expense of his older twin brother, a jock named Esau. With a father like Jacob and a mother like Rachel what kind of son would you expect? Their son, Jacob, grew up to be the father of Joseph, the subject of our case study. He was far from being ideal fatherhood material.

If you were hoping Joseph's mother could help, forget about it. She died in giving birth to Joseph's little brother Benjamin. And Jacob was so grief stricken that he hardly had the time, much less the energy to keep 12 sons straight. At least he didn't have to shuttle them around to soccer, Little League, scouts, choir and youth group, or help them with science projects.

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 37: 1, 7, 8, 11

To console himself over the loss of his beloved Rachel, Jacob had Joseph and baby Benjamin. Joseph must have had his mother's good looks, looks that latter would unfortunately bring him to the attention of a highly placed Egyptian woman named Mrs. Potiphar.

In his grief Jacob gave Joseph a robe to wear. I need to interrupt the story to clear up something about this robe. In the King James Version it's called "a coat of many colors."<sup>5</sup> I like that – I grew up picturing Joseph wearing a bathrobe like mine, only it had all the colors of the rainbow. In Sunday school we would use every crayon we had to color that coat. More recently the robe became Andrew Lloyd Webber's "amazing technicolor dream coat."

In the Revised Standard Version it's called "a coat with long sleeves." And that really makes more sense because Joseph was to supervise his brothers at their labors. The laborers had to roll up their sleeves, while the boss could wear a coat with long sleeves.

But the truth is that it wasn't a coat of many colors, and the long sleeves weren't for the boss. The robe was a woman's robe. Hang on – let me explain. I realize that some of you won't believe me, and others will not hear another word I say because you'll be trying to process the thought of Joseph wearing a woman's garment. But give me a chance!

The only other time the word for this robe appears in the Bible is 2 Samuel 13: 18-19 in the tragic story of Tamar and Ammon. Tamar is the daughter of King David. The Bible says, "Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves; for this is how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times."

Why would Jacob dress his son in a garment designed for virgin girls? Here is a very likely answer. Jacob missed his dead wife so much that he dressed his young son who had Rachel's good looks in the robe his dead mother had worn when she was a young girl." I told you the family was dysfunctional.

Now back to the case study. Jacob sent Joseph to check up on his big

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 37: 3

brothers from Hebron north to Shechem (modern Nablus just to give you contemporary Palestinian-Israeli reference points). They had gone on for better pasture but Joseph found them. They saw him from a distance – a guy in a dress on a camel would stand out. Why didn't he take that robe off when he was out of Jacob's sight? Some of the responsibility for these sibling problems rests with Joseph. The brothers had had enough and decided to kill him.

A brother named Reuben had a better idea – “just throw him in a bit and let a wild animal take care of him.” Reuben was really just stalling for time and hoping to come back and save the lad. So into the pit he went, sans robe. Just then some traders came by, and another brother named Judah saw a way to avoid having blood on their hands – “let's sell him to the traders as a slave. No blood on our hands and some silver in our purses”. They kill a goat, dip that robe in the blood, go home, show it to Jacob and trick the old trickster into believing that some wild animal has eaten Joseph.

I need to fast forward now on the story. Joseph ends up working for an Egyptian officer named Potiphar. He does well, until he catches the eye of the boss's wife. Genesis 39: 6 says he was handsome and good-looking. But the Lord is with him and he turns out to be seduction proof. When she accuses him of the very thing he wouldn't do, Joseph ends up in jail. There he gets a reputation as someone who can interpret dreams accurately. One of the prisoners gets out, goes to work for the Pharaoh and passes on the word that Joseph can interpret dreams. Pharaoh sends for him because he has a doozy of a dream. Joseph explains it, and to make a long story short ends up as number two man in Egypt after Pharaoh.

Thanks to Joseph, the Egyptians have lots of grain when the rest of that part of the world is experiencing a terrible famine. Poor old Jacob sends his 10 oldest sons down to Egypt to get grain. Then comes one of the greatest scenes in the Bible. Guess who they have to see to get the grain? Joseph recognizes them, but they don't recognize him. He's older and wearing men's clothing!

Now think how long Joseph has had to fret, to carry a grudge, to replay what they did to him, to go over and over in his gut all that he feels about those guys. Joseph is the second most powerful man in the world. Surely he must have thought about what he would do if their paths ever crossed.

What would you do if you were Joseph? I hope I would behave like he did, but I'm afraid I might have tossed them down into some nice, dark, damp, smelly Egyptian pit – maybe like the one where Aida and Rhadames suffocated – just to give them a taste of their own medicine. Then maybe I might have said, “OK, that was pretty bad. Sorry about that. Let me move you to better quarters – here's the jail where I was a prisoner. See how you like that.”

Well, I'm ashamed of myself for even thinking like that, but, come on, you have revenge fantasies too, don't you?

But Joseph forgave them. Joseph forgave them! “Come closer to me...do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves..for God has sent me here before you to preserve life...it was not you who sent me here, but God...I will provide for you...” He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them.

Fast forward again – Jacob moves the whole clan to Egypt where they are well fed. But then the old man died. Joseph honored his father's request, had him embalmed in the Egyptian fashion, and took Jacob's mummy to Hebron to bury him in the Cave of Machpelah.

Then the 12 brothers went back to Egypt. Genesis 50: 15 says, “Realizing that their father was dead (duh!), 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.’” They approach Joseph and play the “father's last request card,” saying that Jacob had told them to tell him to forgive him because even though what they did was a crime (their words), they are servants of the God of your father. On that note they fall down and break into tears, offering to be his live slaves rather than his dead brothers.

Joseph says, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God. You meant it for evil, but the Lord meant it for good.”<sup>6</sup>

## **HOW DID HE DO THAT? A SEVEN STEP PROGRAM**

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 50: 20

The big question from the Joseph story is, “How did he do that?” How did he get to point where he forgave them instead of giving his brothers what they deserved, good and hard?

We can get the answer to the question and find out how to act that way ourselves if we pay close attention to what Joseph said to his brothers when he forgave them in Genesis 45: 4ff. and in Genesis 50: 20. Part of what I am about to say comes from insights shared last Wednesday evening when those present for the Bible study discussed this passage and the notion of forgiveness.

“Come closer to me.” To forgive, get close. Physically close if possible, or for sure, emotionally close. Put yourself in the other guy’s shoes. Walk a mile in his moccasins – you know the drill, but don’t stop there. Any secular self-help source would say the same thing.

“I am your brother whom you sold into Egypt.” Name the relationship, a relationship that still exists in spite of everything. And name the offense – “you sold me into slavery” – an offense that won’t go away, can’t be ignored – there’s an elephant in the room – an offense that won’t yield to that nonsense about “forgiving and forgetting.” Forgive, yes! Forget, what - pretend? It’s on the record like 20 minutes on Nixon’s tape recorder. My friend, George Toole, the pastor at Towson Presbyterian Church, once gave a paper on the biblical term, “covering your sins.” He made the point that the image of covering is that of a soft cloth over a large rock with jagged edges. The cloth covers the rock, but we know it’s still there. We can’t forget it’s there, but it’s covered, and the cloth while revealing its contours conceals the rough edges. Forgive? Yes! Forget? No!

“Do not be angry with yourselves.” That remarkable comment shows that Joseph understood the dynamic of all the dark feelings that drove the brothers to do what they had done. They had reason to hate themselves – they had totally messed up. Sure, they had cause to despise Joseph, but they had nursed their grudges into full-blown pathology. “Do not be angry with yourselves.”

“For God sent me before you to preserve life.” I have no idea how long it took Joseph to decide that God had sent him there. I doubt if he felt that

God had put him into a pit in Palestine or a jail in Egypt, but when enough time had passed for him to have the long look, he could see the hand of God in the big picture. The quote at the top of your bulletin from Frederick Buechner makes it clear that we have too much pride to forgive under our own power – we need the help of God!

“God sent me before you to preserve life.” Life was what it was all about. Preserve life – hating is death; carrying a grudge is deadly; revenge eats us up like cancer. Forgiveness is life, a fresh start, another chance, and room to breathe.

“I will provide for you...” A key piece of forgiveness is the giving, the providing, the sharing, living together in the restored, healed community.

“You meant it for evil, but the Lord meant it for God.” When Joseph says these words years later, after his father had died and when his brothers had tipped their hand that they never really believed that he had forgiven them, he renames the offense and simultaneously renames the life giving intention of God in the whole process. Forgiveness is an ongoing process. It takes an act of will, active good will, a choice, something we decided to live with. Forgiveness is not a casual, “It’s over; it doesn’t matter,” when it’s not over and it did matter.

## **CONCLUSION**

Forgiveness is an act of will, a decision to make a relationship work, a choice not to allow the past to interfere. It is a decision to preserve life in a whole, healthy relationship. Forgiveness is a choice to live in a certain way, with a certain structure and pattern of grace, a discipline that reaffirms the decision to forgive with multiple forgiveness, 7 time 70 Jesus said in an expression that meant infinity,

Jesus had every right to say that. On the cross said, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” His first followers took his example seriously. As the stones were raining down on Stephen to crush the life out of his young body, the first Christian martyr said pretty much the same thing, “Lord, do

not hold this sin against them.”<sup>7</sup>

The stakes in forgiveness are high, but Jesus forgave when the stakes had never been higher. Stephen showed that a mere mortal could do it. They each forgave people who were killing them.

Joseph may be closer to us. After all, we aren't the Savior, and we aren't likely candidates for martyrdom. But the stakes are still high and forgiveness is still the issue. Joseph shows us that it can be done if we give our wills again and again to the God who bids us, “Fret not...trust in the Lord...be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him...do not fret...refrain from anger and forsake wrath...do not fret- it only leads to evil – love your enemies...forgive and you will be forgiven.”

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<sup>7</sup> Acts 7: 60