

“Forgive and Live” Joseph Story Part Two

August 20, 2017
Genesis 45: 1-15 CEV

Rev. Kimberly Heath
Wall Street United Church

The Joseph narrative is one of the greatest stories in the Bible. It's got every element of a great story: a dysfunctional family, and a protagonist who is full of himself, is humbled, and rises to his real potential. The story is full of betrayal, money, sex, violence, famine, royalty, power, potential revenge and finally redemption and reconciliation. The only thing missing is a good car chase – I'm sure we could squeeze a chariot race in there somewhere to give it a 100% Tomato rating!

Today we are doing Part Two of the Joseph story. Just to recap, (in case you missed last week): Joseph was the favourite son and his father lavished him with praise and gifts. The other 11 sons, most of whom were older and bigger, resented his status and the way he flaunted it to the point where they sold him into slavery.

Meanwhile Joseph was purchased as a slave in Egypt by a successful household: the Potiphars, and life after the brutal betrayal seems to take a turn for the better. Joseph gains the trust and respect of his master and is given the responsibility of managing the entire household, which he excels at until he is shafted again: this time by his employer – actually his employer's wife. She would dearly have liked an affair with the young and very attractive Joseph, but when as a matter of honour he refuses, she responds by accusing him of attempted rape. He is thrown in prison and totally forgotten. First he was betrayed, and then he was falsely accused. He remains in jail, forgotten, for years.

But God does not forget about Joseph. One day he is given the opportunity to interpret a dream that the Pharaoh had which was troubling the Pharaoh greatly. None of his Wise Counsellors could interpret the Pharaoh's dream, but with God's help, Joseph could. The dream revealed that there would be a great famine in the land for many years, but before that there would be several years of bumper crops. So impressed was the Pharaoh with Joseph's wisdom that he put him in charge of preparing and storing up food for the coming famine. Joseph ended up being essentially the prime minister of Egypt. He becomes the second most powerful man in Egypt, second only to the Pharaoh.

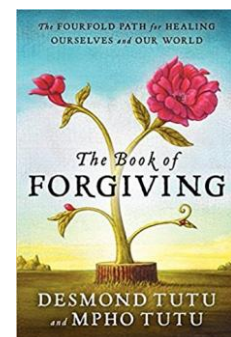
The scripture we read earlier comes at the climax of this story. Joseph's brothers come to Egypt desperate for food, because the famine that Joseph had foretold was two years in and it was wide spread and was affecting his family back in the land of Canaan. When the brothers come they don't recognize Joseph, and they end up fulfilling Joseph's dream by bowing down to this great and powerful man.

There are so many miracles in this story, and the greatest miracle of all is the change that took place in Joseph's heart that allowed him to forgive his brothers. That was the miracle that saved the nation of Israel.

If you have a relationship in your family now that is causing you grief and pain, let me give you some good news and some bad news. Let's get the bad news out of the way first. People rarely change. If you are waiting for your brother or mother or child or whoever to suddenly realize what a donkey's rear end they've been and tell you how sorry they are...you may be waiting an awfully long time. It's not impossible, but it's not very likely either. Mark Twain once said: "*Don't expect too much of human beings. We were created at the end of the week when God was tired and looking forward to a day off.*" In a way he is right. Don't expect others to change. Here's the good news: others may not change, but *you can* change. With God's help, you can change.

Joseph was not perfect, but he didn't deserve what happened to him. What happened to Joseph was an incredible injustice. I have no doubt that Joseph had a lot of anger. Anger at his brothers, anger at his former employer, anger at God; his heart must have been full of it. Anger is a natural response to injustice. Anger is one of the stages of grief and Joseph had a lot to grieve – he had a promising future which was stolen from him not once but twice. Anger is natural. It's a stepping stone across the fast-moving waters of injustice, but you don't want to get stuck there – you don't want to turn a stepping stone into your 'Island home'. Many people sadly do. Thank God Joseph didn't.

Many in this congregation took the course or read *The Book of Forgiving* last Spring, and one of the things we learned is that every time we are hurt we stand at a crossroad. We have a choice to make: we can choose the path of revenge and retaliation, or the path of forgiveness and reconciliation. The easy one, the one we fall into naturally is the first – revenge and retaliation. But though it feels like it will satisfy, that path will eat you alive. An old



proverb says, "*The person who pursues revenge should dig two graves.*" When you have been hurt and you hold onto that hurt it grows like a cancer inside you, and eventually, if you let it, it will destroy you and other people.

Last week we talked about how one of our biggest life tasks is to die to our small or false self and be born to a new and true self. It is the small-fearful-self-centered self that feels revenge will solve the hurt in our heart. It was because Joseph was able to die to his false self that he was able to forgive his brothers.

I'd be willing to bet that if by some other sequence of events, after being sold into slavery, if Joseph had ended up right away in Pharaoh's house and skipped the prison part, the reunion with his brothers would have looked very different from the way it did in the end. I have a strong feeling that most of the tribes of Israel would have died out, not by famine but by a murderous revenge. But by the grace of God, that dark time in prison became a burial ground for his anger, his regrets, his grief and his fear.

This has been a gut wrenching week as we digest and try to understand the events at Charlottesville last Saturday and as we try to figure out what we can do to stop this growing hatred. And it is growing.

What can we do? Vancouver resident Tony McAleer is someone worth listening to. McAleer is a former white supremacist himself. For 15 years, beginning in the 80's, he was deeply involved in the neo-Nazi group White Aryan Resistance and was involved in anti-immigrant activism, Holocaust denial and street violence. His nickname was Goebbels. He was highly connected to the White Supremacist hate groups in the U.S. and did a lot to recruit young people to a life of hatred and violence. Until he managed to get out. Today he is the executive director of *Life After Hate* — an organization that helps others to get out of extremist groups and lifestyles. (Incidentally this organization was funded by the Obama administration but de-funded by the Trump administration).

How did McAleer end up getting involved in the white supremacy movement in the first place? He says that the most common factor in the backgrounds of those who wind up in violent extremist movements is "emotional trauma". There was no violence in his childhood home, but his father was largely absent, and when he



was around he was emotionally abusive and that left him angry and confused. The private school he attended in Vancouver made it worse. Teachers perplexed by his combination of disruptive behaviour and obvious intelligence decided: "Let's beat the grades into him." In this school and others, he was subjected to bullying from teachers and students. In order to escape being bullied, he became a bully himself.

When he did end up meeting and joining a punk extremist group he said he said it brought him "a sense of belonging. A sense of purpose. A sense of power coming from a place where I was feeling powerless."

He managed to get out partly by a fluke – someone said to him "You've been trying to sell Nazism and Adolf Hitler. But people actually *want* life insurance." Realizing he'd likely make more money, McAleer made career change and became a successful financial planner.

When his daughter was born in 1991, he felt a visceral change. "A tingling went from the top of my scalp all the way down my body," he recalls. In 1995, the year his son was born, he also became a single father. He increasingly saw the white power movement for what it was: "completely dysfunctional. Wounded people, alcoholism, violence. I can't think of a single person who experienced joy on a daily basis."

He calls himself and others who have escaped that life "Formers". The hardest thing for him and most other formers in getting out, he says, is to "forgive ourselves for what we've done. It sounds self-serving, but the more I have compassion and forgiveness for myself, the more I can diminish my capacity to do harm in the world."



He worries about how the left is responding to the current crises. He sees that both sides are dehumanizing the other side. "You can't defeat hate with hate." But he also says that small things make a difference. He tells the story that it was a very small action that planted a seed for another man to get out of his lifestyle. When the man was being served at McDonald's by an elderly African-American woman, she saw the swastika tattooed on his hand. She looked him in the eye and said, "Oh honey, you're so much better than that."

McAleer says that: "*The hardest thing in the world is to have compassion for those who have no compassion, but those are the people who need it the most.*"

Forgiveness is not easy. It takes courage but it brings freedom, it brings life. What or who do you need to forgive? What do you need to forgive yourself for?

Friends, there is so much in life and in our relationships that we can't change, but with God's help, you really do have the ability to change your heart and forgive so that you can be set free and live in joy. Through forgiveness you can sever the line that has you painfully hooked to that hurt or that shame and you can be free and live.

The world needs Christians who can do the incredible hard work of forgiveness so that nations and even families and communities don't destroy themselves.

Do you want to know the answer to the hate in the world? It's like there are 3 concentric circles.

I'm going to do it countdown style.

The **third thing** you need to do is to look out and reach out at a national/global level. This is the most difficult one because we are often physically removed and just plain limited in what we can do; but there are times when we are called to do something and when we can do things like lobby governments, sign petitions and or stand up in peaceful protest. The problem with starting here is that when you watch the news you can become overwhelmed and feel helpless and fearful and we end up doing nothing.

The **second thing** is to make a difference where you live. Building bridges with people who are different from you is one important thing you can do to counter hate. How many of you have a genuine friendship with someone who is a different race from you or speaks another language or is of a different religion from you or a different education level? Canada is pretty diverse, but we still tend to hang around with people who are 'like' us. The Jamaicans hang out with Jamaicans and Koreans hang out with Koreans. I'm proud of Wall Street for being involved in bringing refugees to Brockville because that is an important way to build bridges and to understand more about each other.

Another important step in countering hate is to support what we are doing here. I have to tell you that the more I read about the roots of hate movements the more it reminds me of the roots of addiction—they have the same root! One of the biggest ways to help people out of that life or stop them from getting into it is to provide them a place of belonging and

something to believe in. We have that! We can do that! Yes we are Brockville and not Charlottesville, but if you think there isn't hatred in Brockville then give your head a shake.

Our Sunday evening Celebrate Life Service is all about belonging and the powerful, healing, transforming relationship with Jesus. **We have what the world needs more of right here in our church!** It may be small, but more and more we need to recognize and invest in and pray for more of that healing work to happen right here inside our church. There is hope and power in places like our Celebrate Life Service.

The **final thing** you can do and the most important starts with you. You need to learn to forgive. You need to forgive yourself and you need to learn to forgive others. We need to practice in little things so that we can forgive the big ones. Friends, this is a muscle that we need to strengthen. Forgiveness is hard but as a Christian you need to choose it and commit to a life of forgiveness. It is through the hard work of forgiveness (1. Telling the Story 2. Naming the hurt 3. Granting Forgiveness 4. Renewing or Releasing the relationship) that we can change ourselves and make a difference. It will change you. You will become more compassionate and more filled with love and less with fear and resentment. It starts with you. When you change, other people are affected by that change.

Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers set him free for a new life, and it saved a nation. Don't underestimate the life that can come when you give your dark times and hurts to God. God has a plan for you and for others through you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.