

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - August 16, 2020 - Come Closer  
Psalm 133:1-3 and Genesis 45:1-15**

Earlier this week, I had a conversation with a woman who expressed that her brother had been struggling with forgiveness for decades. Some fifty years ago, he was an active duty American soldier stationed in Vietnam. And it was there, on the field of battle, where his best friend died in his arms.

War is more terrible than we could ever imagine, leaving scars of every kind and filling the lives of combatants with a series of traumas that may never heal. When we hear their stories - the accounts of those who have served on the front lines - we instantly recognize that the price they have paid is far too great, and our hearts ache with compassion.

Friends, have you ever struggled to forgive? I'm not talking here about forgiving those every day, run-of-the-mill mistakes or slights. I'm talking about wrestling daily with the wounds that are so personal that you have wondered if the pain would ever go away. You may recall a time when you were sabotaged and undermined at work. Perhaps, you have suffered the end of a bitter divorce. Or maybe your life was forever altered by the actions of a drunk driver.

When we have been hurt this deeply, it is difficult to trust. And when trust is lacking, it feels impossible to forgive. In our second lesson this morning, we discover a narrative so incredible that we can hardly believe it. The main character is Joseph, a prominent advisor to the Egyptian pharaoh who has long been estranged from his family in Israel.

A famine has ravaged Joseph's homeland, and his older brothers have come knocking at the powerful gates of Egypt in the struggle for sustenance and survival. There they are introduced to Joseph, their long lost brother, whom they do not recognize. And as they plead with him for assistance, Joseph's eyes are opened. These are his brothers, and their presence alongside him has forced the advisor to the throne to relive and reckon with the most painful moments of his life.

Decades earlier, these same brothers threw Joseph into a large pit which imprisoned him until slave traders arrived, affixed shackles to his wrists and his ankles, and sold him into Egyptian bondage. Can you imagine forgiving a hurt like that? And yet, here is Joseph modeling forgiveness in the most extraordinary of ways.

In the midst of conversation with them, Joseph can no longer control his emotions. “Rather than leave, he dismisses all attendants so that family members can deal with these issues privately. Yet, he weeps so loudly that it proves not to be a private affair after all.”<sup>1</sup> “Standing alone with his brothers, he reveals his identity. All the brothers are alive.”<sup>2</sup> Immediately, his siblings are terrified, fearing “what this means for their own future.”<sup>3</sup>

As Walter Brueggemann writes, this family “must now live with the reality of a live, powerful, ruling Joseph. There is something going on which the brothers had long since disposed of (or so they thought).”<sup>4</sup> Fittingly, the terror and astonishment of the brothers is not unlike that of the early church with the disclosure of the live Jesus. The family is suddenly set in a new context. Their presumed world has been irreversibly shattered.”<sup>5</sup>

Even so, “Joseph does not scold them or blame them; he does not try to make them feel either guilty or shameful. He asks for no confession of sin and issues no

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<sup>1</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Genesis, The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume I*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1994), 643.

<sup>2</sup> Fretheim, 643.

<sup>3</sup> Fretheim, 644.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 344.

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, 344.

absolution.”<sup>6</sup> “At this climactic point in their relationship, Joseph sits in a position to do with his brothers as he pleases. Yet, he makes no effort to hold their feet to the fire; his language and his demeanor (loud weeping) evidence no anger or irritation.”

<sup>7</sup> In fact, “he manifests more weakness than strength,” as “he sets aside the trappings of royalty and enters into the pathos of the situation, all for the sake of reconciliation.”<sup>8</sup>

For many of you who have long been pursuing the path of Christian discipleship, these passages are familiar. Of Joseph and his brothers. Of the prodigal son and his father. Of Jesus and the cross. Throughout scripture, the message is consistent. That God risks everything in the quest for reconciliation. Indeed, “no human activity can *finally* stymie God’s purposes for life.”<sup>9</sup>

This leads me to wonder and to ask a question of great significance for all followers of Jesus, namely; what is God’s purpose for your life? And more to the point, how might you live as an agent of reconciliation? I ask this, not as one who has perfected this practice of our faith, but as a fellow sojourner in Christ - knowing

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<sup>6</sup> Fretheim, 644.

<sup>7</sup> Fretheim, 645.

<sup>8</sup> Fretheim, 645.

<sup>9</sup> Fretheim, 646.

that if we are to cultivate a mindset of forgiveness, we must first learn that we have also been forgiven.

Friends, as difficult as it is to forgive, it is even harder to admit that we are forgiven. For to do so is to humble ourselves which, to our ears, sounds a lot like weakness. It is to confess that we are not nearly as blameless as we had imagined. And that we are accountable to the One who has the ultimate power over our lives. Most of the time, we hate that. We really, really hate that. So we resist it and we argue it out with the Lord. And we hope that God will bend to our will rather than the other way around.

Yet, we cannot hide forever from the past that shapes our memories. And, in time, we learn that holding onto grudges, along with failing to confess our own shortcomings, is damaging to our souls. For it keeps us in bondage as long as we permit it.

Addressing his brothers, Joseph says, “Come closer to me.” “He has no need to triumph over his family” for a new moment is dawning.<sup>10</sup> “The point is a central

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<sup>10</sup> Brueggemann, 346.

one in the biblical faith: The power to create newness does not come from detachment, but from risky, self-disclosing engagement.”<sup>11</sup> And so it is with us, who dare to come closer to the admission of our failings, to the reconciliation of old hurts, and to the improbable throne of mercy. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> Brueggemann, 345.