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Genesis 50:15-21

Good Intentions

One of my early memories of “church” comes from a preschool VBS class when I was three or four years old. I remember sitting at a table with other children. We were looking at the teacher’s workbook and copying the colored picture of Joseph and his wonderful coat of many colors. We had large jumbo crayons and colored our pictures to match the teacher’s picture in her workbook.

The story of Joseph is a familiar one. A favorite child, he was hated by his brothers and sold into slavery by them. Landing in the household of Potiphar, the captain of Pharoah’s guard, he prospers and is put in charge of Potiphar’s house, learning management skills. A false accusation lands Joseph in Pharoah’s prison, where he successfully interprets the dreams of Pharaoh’s baker and cupbearer. The cupbearer is released but only remembers Joseph when Pharoah has troubling dreams that others cannot interpret. Joseph successfully, with God’s help, interprets Pharoah’s dream and is placed in charge of the whole land, second only to Pharoah himself. During seven good years they prepare for the seven years of famine which will follow.

It is the famine that brings Joseph’s brothers to Egypt in search of food for Jacob’s large family. The story of their meetings with Joseph in Genesis chapters 42 through 45 tell how Joseph eventually made himself known to his brothers. “Do not be distressed,” he tells them, “or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.” “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.” They weep together and Jacob’s family is invited to move from Canaan to Egypt, and given the best land in the country, the land of Goshen.

That is often where we end the story. It seems a fitting end; there is forgiveness, reconciliation, and the family is saved from famine due to Joseph and Pharoah’s generosity and hospitality. But the story does not end there. The Bible tells us that Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years. Seventeen years…time enough to put the past behind and move on with their lives. Jacob blesses Joseph’s two sons and Joseph’s brothers. When Jacob dies a large procession carries him back to Canaan to bury him with his forefathers. But what of his family? They are still living in Egypt, reliant on Joseph and Pharoah’s good will.

And that is the rub. It is hard to accept generosity from someone one has wronged. The brothers worry. They feel guilt and fear. Perhaps Joseph was only kind to them because of their father, who is gone now. They question Joseph’s motives. Perhaps he has brought them here to avenge the wrongs they did to him. Perhaps now the time for retribution has come. So they go to Joseph. We don’t know if Jacob ever truly learned how the brothers had deceived him about Joseph. We don’t know if he ever told them to go to Joseph to beg forgiveness. But the brothers know Jacob loved Joseph, and they know Joseph loved Jacob, so they put the words into Jacob’s mouth as a dying wish: “forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you. Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.”

A few things to consider: there is a power imbalance here. The brothers, who once had power over the young Joseph, now are beholden to Joseph, who is the most powerful man in Egypt next to Pharoah himself. The brothers offer to become Joseph’s slaves, perhaps thinking that is a way to save their own lives and the lives of their families.

We often think of Biblical characters as heroes. We attribute good characteristics to them and seek to emulate them. But the Bible is realistic about good and evil in the world. Jacob’s family was dysfunctional in so many ways. Our children’s Bible lesson today focuses on the relationship between Jacob and his twin Esau. Their parents, Isaac and Rebekah, each had a favorite son. Rebekah connived with Jacob to receive the blessing from Isaac that should have gone to Esau. Jacob himself married two sisters, and favored the younger at the expense of the older. They were competitive, even giving their servant girls to Jacob to produce children for them. We have already talked about Jacob’s favoritism toward Joseph and the relationship between Joseph and his brothers. This was not a family that always got things right. To put it bluntly, I suspect that the boy Joseph was a spoiled brat! I’m not sure I would have liked him any better than his brothers did!

But when the brothers came to him this second time, confessing their wrongs and asking for mercy, Joseph replied: “Do not be afraid! Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear. I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” The Bible says he spoke kindly to them, reassuring them.

What do we make of Joseph? Is he the hero of the story, or is something else going on? I think Joseph himself gives us the answer. “Do not be afraid!, “ he exclaims. “Am I in the place of God?” God is the unseen player in this story. It is God who goes with Joseph into the pit, into captivity, into Potiphar’s household, into prison, into Pharoah’s presence. It is God who enables Joseph to prosper. It is God who works through the circumstances of Joseph’s life to bring about good.

I do not believe God ever desires bad things, hurtful events, for people. But I do believe, just as God did for Joseph, that God can work through those events for good. The bigger picture in this story is not just personal for Joseph’s life, but it is God working through the life of Joseph to bring about salvation for Jacob’s family and even for the people of Egypt and elsewhere who came for food during the years of famine. We do not know how many lives were spared because Joseph understood Pharoah’s dream and was put in charge of Egypt’s resources. This story is an important event in the calling of a people to belong to God and to be a blessing to others.

Cameron B.R. Howard, associate professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, points out that the story “has broader political implications.” “Like the stories of Daniel 1-6 and the book of Esther, Genesis 37 to 50 is a ‘court story’, a genre of literature that seems to have been particularly popular in the post-exilic Diaspora. In these court stories, a Jewish hero finds himself or herself holding favored status in a foreign court…Once elevated, the hero has the opportunity to save his or her family or people because of that access to the imperial power. In the post-exilic era, stories like Joseph, Daniel, and Esther made powerful statements about how to retain religious and ethnic identity in a foreign land. They also reminded Jews in Diaspora that God’s faithfulness to Israel had not wavered, despite the exile and the subsequently ever-changing political landscapes.” (end quote)

The story of Joseph is a story of God’s faithfulness and unending mercy, even in the light of life’s hardships and difficulties. The story encourages us to be faithful even when events push us away from God. The story affirms that even in the midst of dysfunction, evil intentions, bad outcomes, God can work to bring about a greater good.

So what does forgiveness have to do with this? What enabled Joseph to forgive his brothers for the wrongs they had inflicted upon him? The story does not say, but it does give us clues. Throughout Joseph’s trials and tribulations, it appears God was with him and allowed him to prosper in whatever situation he found himself. He prospered in Potiphar’s household. He prospered in prison. He prospered in Pharoah’s service. I suspect the troubles he encountered built character. Joseph had to rely on God’s faithfulness even though his brothers and acquaintances did not always prove faithful. Joseph gained maturity through his experiences. Despite all that had happened, Joseph loved his father and his family.

Joseph also recognized that vengeance belongs to God. “Am I in the place of God?” he asked his brothers. Ultimately God, who knows the hearts and minds of each one of us, is the one who judges the actions or inactions of each of us. The choices we make do have consequences. But we also know God’s love and mercy is endless and abundant. The Apostle Paul wrote that “nothing can separate us from the love of God, “ “Neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8: 38-39)

The Mayo clinic defines forgiveness as an intentional decision to let go of resentment and anger. It doesn’t mean forgetting or even excusing wrongs, nor does it necessarily mean reconciliation with the wrongdoer. But it does release the hold that negative feelings of anger, bitterness and hostility can have on us. The Clinic says that letting go of grudges and bitterness can lead to healthier relationships, improved mental health, less anxiety, stress and depression, lower blood pressure, a stronger immune system, improved self-esteem. Forgiveness offers us peace and hope.

Forgiveness is a process. Sometimes it takes a long time. Sometimes it takes repeated times of forgiveness. We don’t know how long it took Joseph to forgive his brothers. But we do know he did not live a life of bitterness.

Nor can we, when we are the wrongdoer, like Joseph’s brothers, impose the need to forgive on someone else. That is not up to us. What we can do is make restitution where we can. We can work at forgiveness in our own lives, seeking to cultivate empathy, compassion, and love for our neighbors, whoever they may be.

God’s love is abundant and free, God’s mercy is endless, and God’s grace is a blessing freely given. May we open our lives and hearts to receive God’s gifts, whatever our circumstances may be. May we also extend those gifts, a blessing, to others.