

Genesis 50: 15-21

Hard Core Forgiveness

Sunday November 24, 2013

Rev. Susan Cartmell

The Congregational Church of Needham

This month our worship theme is forgiveness. There are lots of Bible stories about this topic because people have been struggling to forgive each other for centuries. Life offers many opportunities to learn the art of forgiveness. Over the recent weeks we have examined the story of the Prodigal Son and talked about Jesus' admonition to forgive without counting how many times.

Forgiveness comes up almost every day. Liberty Mutual has a funny ad that plays on this, and it makes light of all the mistakes people make. You see a man in a tree cutting the limb that hangs over his neighbor's car. Without meaning to, the first man cuts the limb off and it falls on the roof of his neighbor's car utterly demolishing it. Next you see a woman pulling into a parking space along a busy avenue. She parks her car, opens the door and leans over the passenger seat to retrieve her purse. While she does another car comes flying by and takes off the door on the driver's side of her car. The tag line on this ad is that "Liberty Mutual offers forgiveness insurance." That is a nice concept isn't it - forgiveness insurance. The ad says that we need to find good insurance because mistakes will happen. But in church we discover that we need to figure out this forgiveness business because life will happen. People will get hurt. Some of that time, it will be us who gets hurt.

Today we look at one of the oldest stories about forgiveness found in the Bible. It is the story of Joseph and his brothers. You may remember that Joseph was born into a big family. He was the 11th son of Jacob. Now Jacob had two wives and had children with 4 women. But he really only loved one of those women and that was Rachel. So Jacob preferred her children, the eldest of whom was Joseph. Jacob doted on Joseph bought him extravagant gifts, like this coat so splendid that it was made of the

finest colors and silks money could buy. Being young Joseph bragged about his coat of many colors and reminded his elder brothers that their father loved him the best. His brothers fumed with rage, and they plotted to kill him. But instead, they decided to sell him to traders who passed through on the caravan route. They sold their little brother as a slave. He was impertinent and their anger boiled over, but in that moment Joseph's life was changed forever and he went from being someone's pet to the indentured servant of strangers in a strange land. He had lots of time to think about forgiveness. What can we learn from this story about forgiveness for our lives today?

In the first place forgiveness is a survival skill, not a luxury. – Joseph spent a lot of time in jail after his brothers sold him to a slave trader. I imagined he realized that he would need to cultivate new skills and think hard about how to survive, because the tables had been turned on him. Maybe as he strategized his own survival he thought about how he had been wronged, and what a terrible thing his brothers had done. But somewhere in one of those jail cells he concluded that he did not have energy to hate his brothers for the rest of his life. He must have figured out that he might never see them again and it would take a lot of extra energy to hate them, energy he could not spare. His main goal was just surviving. So he decided to let go of his resentment.

Everyone has been hurt by people they love. Your mother criticized your parenting. Your best friend sabotaged your work. Your partner had an affair. These wounds can leave bitterness, anger or even thoughts of revenge. But if you nurse your anger and fail to forgive you can suffer emotional, physical or spiritual pain you don't need. Practicing forgiveness is the decision to release your resentment. It can change the grip that this problem has on you so you can focus your energy on positive things or in re-building your life and moving on. According to an article in the Mayo Clinic newsletter, "Letting go of grudges makes way for new relationships. It can lower blood pressure, reduce anxiety, eliminate stress or hostility, reduce symptoms of depression, and even lower your risk of

alcohol or other substance abuse. If you dwell on your hurt feelings, negative energy replaces positive. You may hold onto the hurt so much that you cannot move on, or enjoy life now. Forgiveness allows you to take some control and stop being a victim. {www.mayoclinic.com/health/forgiveness/MH00131}

Forgiveness does not require reconciliation

You do not need to be reconciled to forgive. Promising yourself that you will not tolerate the kind of treatment you endured will go a long way. Promising yourself that you will speak up and name the behavior that hurt you will make you stronger. Promising yourself you will be different, when people try to hurt you the next time. Forgiveness helps you to take new steps so that you are less of a victim next time. Even if the person who hurt you never changes at all, which is often the case, your ability to speak your truth and protect yourself from further damage, and festering resentment is life giving and life changing.

This week there was a news story about Elizabeth Cheney, who is running for the Republican nomination for the Senate in Wyoming. Last Sunday she went on Fox News condemning gay marriage. It made the news because Liz's sister Mary is gay and she and her wife were not happy. They both spoke up questioning and criticizing Liz's statement on their Facebook pages. You can be sure that no one will soon forget what was said. When they all gather, if they do for Thanksgiving, it will be a tense dinner, I imagine in the Cheney home.

Dan Wasserman had a cartoon in the Globe about this. It was a picture of a campaign headquarters with campaign workers gazing at a sign on the wall. The sign was a quote from Liz Cheney candidate for Senate. "Outlaw my in-law" Liz Cheney for Senate. One campaign worker said, "Well that's certainly bold". Another chimed in "And it might appeal to a lot of families, especially around the holidays." Family life has lots of rough edges, some more public than others. But we all smile because

the Cheney's debacle could have happened to any one of us. That is why forgiveness is such an important survival skill in life.

In the second place, Forgiveness is not forgetting. It is a myth that you forgive and forget. You don't have to dwell on things, but you don't necessarily forget. Joseph's life was utterly transformed when his brothers sold him. One day he was an affluent young man with a future, the next day he was a prisoner and a refugee who was someone else's property. His future was on the block, where he might be sold to make bricks or work in a stone quarry in the hot Egyptian sun all day. He lost all autonomy, and his worth as a human being rested in his owner's hands. If he fell off a ladder, or succumbed to prison violence no one would have noticed, and history would have forgotten Joseph. Joseph had a lot to forgive, but I doubt that he could ever forget what happened to him.

In an article in *Christian Century* a senior fellow at the University of Virginia institute for Advanced Studies has written an article from his book Journey toward Justice. He says "Forgetting things does not help forgiveness; "I cannot be bothered with insults from scum like you" That is emotionless dismissal, not forgiveness. {Nicholas Wolterstorff in *Christian Century* November 13, 2013 p. 26}." You cannot forgive someone whom you have dismissed. You have to take the doer and the deed with moral seriousness. In order to forgive you have to remember what was done to you. Sometimes forgetting forestalls forgiveness. Forgiveness is not the same as letting bygones be bygones."

You cannot ignore your sense of betrayal or violation or pain. You cannot just pretend it never happened, which is what some people do when they seek to forget. You will probably need to tell your story to a few close friends, or a professional, or write about it somewhere. Forgiveness is not a magic wand you wave. It is not a process of rising above the fray. It is much more like stepping out of old skin-like a lizard. Standing up and walking away from the anger that can consume you otherwise. You don't

condone what happened. You don't forget what happened. But you don't allow it to eat you from the inside.

Finally, forgiveness changes your life for good.

Joseph transformed himself. He was a selfish brat as a child. But he turned his life around and became one of the most powerful men in the ancient world, a top administrator for the Pharaoh. How did he achieve such an enormous transformation? How did he accomplish the original Operation Bootstrap? How did he climb from the life of a slave up to that of a regional executive managing famine relief? Joseph realized his potential in life by letting go of the damaging parts of his past history, and staying focused on his dreams for the future. Joseph had always been a dreamer, and he stayed true to those gifts, and did not let his resentment or anger get in the way.

He grew wise enough to see that because of the way he was treated he was actually in a better position than he would have been back home. God used his brothers' cruelty for purposes no one could see, and things worked out for the good. God's view which we grasp in fleeting ways is that we are all struggling to do the best we can.

When you gather for your Thanksgiving meal I wonder if you can imagine that God is your Host. Whoever is your earthly host at the table the real Host is your Heavenly Father. God is the Creator of all of the food and all the people gathered and all of the blessings of life itself. So there is something humbling and edifying about remembering that you are at God's table. There will be pettiness; there always is when people gather, but if we can all remember that we are at God's table every day, it changes things. It makes it easier to relinquish resentment, and it makes it easier to forgive people, and it makes it easier to step away from the past and into your best self, going forward. **The best revenge is being free of the past, and looking to the future, and creating a life where you thrive.**