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Forgiveness

This story is a stunning example of forgiveness. Joseph forgives his brothers whose jealousy of him led them to betray, reject and leave him for dead. And he doesn't just forgive them, but welcomes them to come live with him and gives them a king's ransom of wealth. It's an incredible act of forgiveness.

It is the kind of forgiveness story that would still make headlines today. Which I know, because every so often, there are these kinds of amazing forgiveness stories in the news - stories of victims forgiving their torturer, attacker, abuser; stories of forgiveness from the families of murder victims. Stories of people who have experienced the unforgivable and who are yet somehow able to look in the face of their oppressor, abuser or the person who took a loved one from them, and forgive them. These stories make the news because they cause us to wonder if we would do the same. Would we be able to forgive something so terrible? Would we even want to?

The side effect of these stories is sometimes not just to make us wonder but to make us feel guilty for what and who we haven't forgiven in our own lives. When we hear these amazing stories and compare them to the things we carry anger, betrayal and hurt over, the comparison can leave us wondering if we are just less capable of forgiving than other people.

But because of the way we often hear these stories, I believe we have developed a misunderstanding about forgiveness. The news stories we hear or when we read just this one part of Joseph's story can make it appear that forgiveness is a single act or event. It seems like the people capable of forgiving such terrible acts just woke up that day with the ability to forgive that way. But that, at least in my experience, isn't how forgiveness works. To forgive big, we must have practiced forgiving small. Forgiveness is

a practice, a daily practice, sometimes an hourly practice - a spiritual discipline. And you don't go around forgiving murderers on your first day of practice; any more than you paint a Monet after one art lesson or land a double axel jump on the ice your first-time skating.

And, even with practice, more often than not, forgiveness still happens over a period of time, not all at once. It takes time to get to forgiveness. And even once we forgive, our forgiveness doesn't erase what happened. So, feelings of anger, hurt or sadness may still continue to come up as we continue to experience the effects of the hurtful action on us at different times of our life. This means we often have to keep forgiving the same hurtful action over and over again as we understand it and its impact on us in new ways through our life.

So, consider with me the possibility that Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers didn't begin when he was lying at the bottom of the pit they threw him in or as he was shackled in chains walking towards Egypt. No, perhaps, forgiving his brothers came a bit easier after he found a way to forgive the slave owners who had held him captive or the jailors who locked him in the cell. Maybe he worked on forgiving Potiphar's wife for her false accusations. Maybe in those long hours sitting in a jail cell, Joseph practiced forgiveness a little bit at a time...remembering each brother and the things he loved about him; thinking about the good times they'd had together; and even trying to understand their jealousy of him.

And so, years later, when his brothers come to him begging for food, not even recognizing him, Joseph was able to forgive big. This forgiveness doesn't mean what they did was right. The reality of missing so many years with his family must have still been painful. But this forgiveness was not just for Joseph's brothers. This forgiveness has a lot of layers.

The first layer of the forgiveness is about the position Joseph was in. Joseph had all the power in this situation. He could send his family to starve and no one would even judge him for it. But, this forgiveness comes from the second most powerful person in Egypt. Joseph had complete power to mete out any justice he saw fit, but he chose mercy.

The book I'm reading right now, *Theo of Golden*, has a line of advice one character gives another character when they are trying to make a difficult decision about if they should forgive or punish someone who has hurt them very badly. The advice is to remember that:

"There's justice and there's mercy. If you're not sure what to do and you've got to choose one or the other, I say always go the mercy way. You make a mistake, make it for mercy. Bad mercy don't hurt nearly like bad justice."

Joseph, second in command of the most powerful nation, chooses mercy, even if it is undeserved mercy, over bad justice, punitive, retributive justice. In this moment, Joseph offers an example to a whole nation of what it looks like to be merciful.

A second layer of forgiveness, Joseph's forgiveness allows for the sake of the one harmed second hand by his brother's evil actions - his father. The first question he asks them is: "is my father alive?" In learning that his father is still living, he knows the only chance to be reunited in relationship with this father is to forgive his brothers. By forgiving his brothers Joseph can also be reunited with his father. And after being apart

for so many years, after so many years of grieving for each other, by forgiving his brothers, Joseph gets his father back as well. And his father gets Joseph back without having to cast out all his other sons.

A third layer of forgiveness, Joseph's act of forgiveness frees himself to have the future he wants. Catholic nun and author, Joan Chittister said, "The great spiritual question is not whether or not this person, this situation, deserves mercy. It is about whether or not we ourselves are capable of showing it." Or the Buddha said, "Holding onto anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one getting burned." Joseph chose to love his brothers, and thus heal himself as well. He forgives to let go of the anger, the pain, the hurt and betrayal that might otherwise consume him.

So, Joseph's forgiveness allows an example of mercy for his nation, a chance for restoration of his whole family and for his own sake.

But, there is still one more layer. There is still another important aspect of Joseph's forgiveness. Joseph's forgiveness shows his brothers something about God's providence—God's plan. Joseph says "God sent me before you to preserve you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. It was not you who sent me here, but God."

Now, we should be careful here because this has been misinterpreted as Joseph saying that God caused his brothers to do this terrible thing to him; that God planned and orchestrated the violence of Joseph's brothers because it would bring Joseph to this place. This understanding leads to the kinds of common platitudes like "The ends justify the means." "God won't give you more than you can handle." As if to say, God causes suffering and pain to see how strong we are or that God makes terrible things happen to eventually lead to something good.

But, this God is not the God of love, mercy, justice and forgiveness to which the Bible bears witnesses. God did not literally send Joseph down into the pit and force his brother's to sell him into slavery. The human intentions and actions were evil, his brothers chose to harm him of their own accord, but God is able to turn evil to good for God's purposes. And at this point, Joseph was able to look over his life with a long view and see God's hand in his redemption. Joseph sees God's hand in the dreams he interpreted; he sees God's hand in the right people placed in his life at the right time; he sees that God did not cause the bad things, but God was there through all the bad things. God allowed his brothers the free will with which to make their choices; God did not stop them from choosing evil, but neither did God allow that to be the end of Joseph's story.

Joseph says exactly this to his brother's later in chapter 50 – “even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.”

Joseph looked back at the course of his life—and could see God's hand in it, God's providence working for good. While his brother's actions could never be forgiven, his brother's themselves could be. While his brother's actions caused great harm, God did not let that harm be the end of Joseph's story.

This understanding of God's providence, God's plan, is also a spiritual practice. There will be parts of God's plan we will only have to the ability to understand in the long view, as well as some that we will never understand in our lifetime, but God's plan does reveal itself in plenty of moments of our lives – sometimes with a great a-ha; other times with a slow revelation; sometimes in the words of a friend or stranger; sometimes in a dream or vision. But, just like forgiveness, it takes practice to see; if we practice looking for where God is moving and working for good in our lives, we will start to see it

more and more. Every day, we are invited to consider where was God at work today? How has God used me for good today and where did I choose something else instead?

I met a woman last weekend who got to telling me her whole life story. We were at a rehearsal dinner and there was time and so she told me the highs and lows over the many years of her life. As she described her life to me, she said that many years ago she started the practice of keeping a journal just for the times she recognized God at work in her life. Sometimes, it is right away when something happens, sometimes it is years after when she recognizes how things came together. She said she keeps the journal and then anytime she wonders where God is or feels despair about something in her life, or there is something she can't imagine anything good about, she goes back to read the journal and remember that God hasn't abandoned her. It helps her trust that whatever her circumstances are now, God is still at work. It's a spiritual practice that reminds her to trust God is with her.

The Bible is full of stories of amazing forgiveness. Joseph for one, and of course, Jesus as well. Jesus who also had abiding faith in God's providence and plan. I can hardly imagine the kind of forgiveness and providence that allowed Jesus to hang upon the cross and whisper "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do;" or to kneel in the garden knowing what was ahead and say to God, "not my will, but yours."

But, with Jesus and Joseph as our example, we have the opportunity to start in the daily work of these practices; to ask ourselves each day where we can practice forgiveness and where we see God's hand at work for good. With regular practice of these spiritual disciplines, we become the kind of people who astound others with our capacity for forgiveness and our ability to continue to hope in the face of times when it may otherwise feel God has abandoned us entirely.

So, may Joseph be an example to us of, yes, this incredible act of forgiveness, but let us put it into the context of a man who had practiced forgiveness over time, who forgave for the sake of his country, his brothers, himself and for his father, Jacob, but ultimately who forgave because he had come to trust in God's providence and to believe in a God who will continue to work for good in and through Joseph and who promises the same to each of us.