

Easter can arrive as early as the 3rd Sunday in March and as late as the last Sunday in April. Falling as it does on April 17 this year, Easter's late date means an extra long season after Epiphany. That also means getting to some lectionary texts we don't see very often. And so we do not very often get to this literary gem we read from Genesis 45. And I suppose I've become kind of a church nerd, because I get excited to think that it is a narrative that I've not preached on before.

We just heard a snippet of the story today, but the whole Joseph story, I think, is one of the better told stories in our scriptures. In his youth Joseph is sort of a spoiled brat. He simply cannot see how his Dad's special affections for him are riling up his brothers on a daily basis. He was Jacob's favorite, and had made for him a long, fabulous robe. And so when Joseph has dreams of grandeur that feature him as some sort of figure that is worthy of worship, he just sets it all forth in detail over breakfast until finally even his own father urges him to shut up already because Jacob can see the flames of fury flickering in the eyes of his older sons.

Then comes the tawdry narrative of a plot to kill Joseph—while the brothers have the chance when they are somewhere in the outback of Palestine. These brothers are so crazed by sibling rivalry hatred that the one who finally suggests they not murder him but instead sell him into slavery comes off looking like the reasonable one. In the end their father Jacob is decimated by the news of Joseph's alleged demise, at the claws of some ferocious beast. (For the brothers had splattered Joseph's coat with blood so that their father would think he was dead).

Then in Genesis 38, the narrative takes a strange turn and the story of Tamar temporarily interrupts the Joseph narratives. It's

the story of a woman who, like other important women before her, works within the male-dominated structures of her society to achieve her goals and change the direction of Israelite history. The elder brother of Joseph named Judah pulls some stunts with his daughter-in-law Tamar until she finally turns the tables on him.

And meanwhile, Joseph was sold to Potiphar, an official close to the Pharaoh. The narrative describes Joseph's rise to power in Egypt. He ends up in a position of authority second only to the king of Egypt. Joseph reaches such status not through his own political skills but because of his ability to interpret dreams.

Fast forwarding to our reading today in Genesis 45 we come to what we could call "the great reveal." Joseph's clueless brothers bow before this governor of Egypt without knowing that this now bronzed figure arrayed in all the finery of Egyptian royalty is the arrogant young man they had sent to Egypt in the first place. The scenes are humorous, but also heartbreakingly sad. Despite it all, Joseph loves his brothers and he for sure loves the father he's now not seen in years. Finally, he can contain himself no more and bursts into joyful tears in front of them and spills all the beans. His brothers are probably scared—because with a snap of his fingers Joseph could no doubt order the beheading of all of them. And who could blame him?

But, of course, the roles are reversed. The last line of our reading says that once the brothers were convinced this really was Joseph and that it seemed likely love and not vengeance was on the menu, the text tells us they talked with Joseph. Now THAT must have been an awkward conversation! Wonder what they said?

At the end of Genesis after Jacob, the father, dies the older brothers probably figure that now the hammer was going to fall after all. With the old man out of the way, nothing could stop Joseph from murdering the lot of them. So on that occasion, as on this one from Genesis 45, Joseph delivers one version or another of the famous line—“You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.”

Now, what the brothers did to Joseph was not just “meant for evil.” It **was** evil. It was wicked. It was sinful. It was wrong. Period. And there should not be any easy dismissal of these facts. Maybe we are too quick to just look at it in retrospect, saying that God managed to bring something good anyway. So it’s all good. There is this saying of Neal Plantinga: “God can hit straight shots with crooked sticks. But that’s no excuse for being a crooked stick.”

Joseph **had** the power to punish his brothers, but he didn’t. His real interest was to find out who they had become and what they were prepared to do to avoid repeating their old offense. The test which he subjected them to in regard to the treatment of his little brother Benjamin was really an open door into the future, though they could not tell that at the time.

Now, what if Joseph, as the powerful one, had sold his brothers into slavery themselves or had simply sent them away empty to perish from the famine? If Jacob’s sons do not survive, God’s promise to Abraham fails. This scenario of reconciliation is critical to the larger movement of God through Genesis and Exodus and beyond, and it never could have happened if Joseph had not forgiven his brothers.

L. William Countryman has written an entire book on the subject of forgiveness, entitled *Forgiven and Forgiving*. I have to admit that I've returned to that book on several occasions when I've needed some reinforcement on the subject!

Here's a snippet of what he has to say:

"The Greek word that we translate as "forgive" means basically "to let go." "Forgive us our debts" means "Let our debts go; turn them loose." Forgiveness involves a letting go—letting go of our investment in the past so that we can turn toward the future; letting go of our need to control the other; even letting go of our own sense of righteousness so that something new can happen in the world.

Forgiveness, then, looks to the future. Yet it doesn't claim to control the future in detail. But if we're not expecting to control our enemies by forgiving them and if we're not trying to build a future purely to our own liking, what *are* we doing when we forgive? We're doing two things: 1) we're admitting that we still belong to the same human family as our enemies, and 2) we're leaving the door open to the hope of a shared future."

Allen Hilton says that "Joseph's story has space for us all because, however different our reality is from Joseph's, God's reconciling movement in the world still and always hinges on forgiveness. Everyone has access, because the dramatic story of Genesis 45 longs to be played out again every time someone is wronged. A pope steps into an Italian jail cell and forgives his would-be assassin; a grieving mother walks across a tense courtroom to embrace the man whose drunk driving snatched away her son's life; in South Africa, as apartheid is dismantled, race inconceivably forgives race.

Joseph's God lives on in a new form. A spouse or partner forgives their spouse or partner, a friend forgives their friend, an

enemy forgives enemy—reconciliation breaks out in these moments, and suddenly the position of the victim has radically changed. In the moment of forgiveness, the wronged one is transformed from critic of the world as it is to co-creator with God of a brand-new world. And in that new creation, a light comes on: maybe our world is not so different from Joseph’s after all. Maybe forgiveness and love and reconciliation are God’s true prosperity.”

Thanks be to God!