

**St. Paul Lutheran Church  
Grant Park, Illinois  
The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, February 24, 2019  
Genesis 45:3-8a, 15**

*Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.*

*Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.*

*"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.*

A surprise reunion involving military families are happy occasions. Allow me to share a video of one such reunion. Pretty special, isn't it? A dad who has been deployed for over a year is able to surprise his son who has no clue he is back home. The video shows the range of emotions which the son experiences. His mouth opens in shock when he realizes the catcher actually is his dad. He eagerly runs to give his dad a huge hug. Finally, he begins weeping because he is so happy to see his dad. Good stuff.

This video reminds me a lot of our Old Testament lesson where a shocking family reunion takes place. The video shows us a reunion where the joy is almost immediate. The reunion in our lesson is a little bit different. It does bring joy, but we were going to need some time to search for it. How will we find the joy? We will find joy by learning to forgive, without conditions, understanding God's plan and trusting God's will.

Our story this morning is the conclusion to a much longer story arc which begins in Genesis chapter 37. Genesis 37 introduces us to Jacob's sons. Joseph was Jacob's favorite son. Joseph has a couple of dreams in this chapter which he shares with his family. The dreams indicate Joseph will one day rule over his family. Joseph's proud boasting, along with his father's favoritism, incites the rest of Jacob's sons to hate Joseph. Their hatred leads them to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt.

Joseph becomes a slave for a man names Potiphar. Potiphar's wife falsely accuses Joseph of rape and Joseph is thrown into prison. He eventually comes into contact with a couple of Pharaoh's officials who he assists interpreting their dreams. Finally, when Pharaoh has dreams he can't interpret, Joseph is summoned to tell the meaning to Pharaoh. Pharaoh is pleased with the interpretation and promotes Joseph to be his second in command.

The dreams showed Pharaoh that seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine. Joseph was in charge of collecting food during those seven good years to distribute during the seven bad years. The famine eventually impacted Joseph's family and they sought food out from Joseph. Joseph recognized them, but they didn't recognize him. Joseph puts them through a series of tests before the events of our lesson take place.

**“Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph! Is my father still living?’”** Imagine what it must have been like for those brothers. You sold your brother into slavery over 20 years earlier. You lied to your father about what happened to him. You needed to keep your actions secret for over 20 years lest your father find out what you did. Now, you are staring face to face with your brother who you treated terribly, has had over 20 years to think about it and he is second in command in the most powerful nation on earth.

How would you react? **“But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.”** This wasn't a happy or joyous reunion. It was a reunion filled with absolute terror. The brothers knew they were guilty. They were caught and their brother could do anything he wanted to them and they couldn't stop him. It was no wonder this family reunion was a reunion which produced terror rather than joy.

Yet, didn't I say before the joy would come? It will, but how? **“Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come close to me.’ When they had done so, he said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!**

**And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here.”** Joseph tells his brothers to come closer to see not only is it really him, but in order to speak words of comfort to them.

Joseph implores his brothers not to be angry and upset with themselves for selling him into slavery to Egypt. How could he say such a thing? He had over 20 years to come up with a way to get even with them, but he wasn't mad with them. He spoke words of love and comfort to them. How could he act with such love? Joseph acted with love because he forgave his brothers without conditions. He forgave them and asked for nothing back.

Where did Joseph's ability to forgive come from? **“Because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping.”** Joseph understood God is able to take actions (even sinful actions) and work them to fulfill his plan. God sent Joseph to Egypt because he was going to use Joseph to save countless lives and to get Jacob's family down to Egypt.

There is no way Joseph would have known what God was doing on the day his brothers sold him into slavery. He must have questioned God's motives when God allowed him to be falsely accused and thrown into prison. He must have been overwhelmed by God's generosity when he rose to second command in Egypt. The moment his brothers stood in front of him the first time you can almost see God's plan to send him to Egypt before his family clicking into place in Joseph's mind.

You might hear this story and think, “This is a really incredible story, but does God really want me to imitate Joseph? I mean, come on, Joseph had a really good life. He was second in command in Egypt. He had been that position for nine years. He was rich, powerful and successful. He had it easy to understand God's plan and to forgive without conditions. I would forgive like him too, if I were in his position, but I don't see myself ever getting there.”

Sure, life was good for Joseph, but don't discount the difficulty of his forgiveness. His brothers hurt him. They cost him 20 years with his family. His life was wretched for 13 years before it got better. It was not easy for him to forgive his brothers. He had over 20 years to learn to forgive them and to do it without conditions attached. Where did he get this ability to forgive? It didn't come from him. The Lord taught him to forgive through the perspective of time.

Learning to forgive those who hurt you isn't fun. In fact, you'll often have questions about it. Why didn't God stop the speeding car from losing control and changing my life forever? Why didn't God keep my son or daughter away from the kids who got them hooked on drugs? Why didn't God stop the thief from stealing my car? Why is my rapist allowed to go free? Why are those who inflict pain and suffering on Christians praised by the media while innocent Christians suffer?

Christians struggle and grapple with trying to understand God's plan for events in their lives and why they need to forgive the bad actors involved. Yet, Joseph guides us through this difficult lesson. **“But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great**

**deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.”** The reason Joseph was able to forgive was he trusted God’s will for his life.

God made it clear to Joseph that he had a specific plan for him. He was going to use Joseph to preserve the promised savior’s line and fulfill a promise he made to Abraham about his people growing into a mighty nation in a foreign land. Joseph trusted God’s will for his life and this gave him the freedom to forgive his brothers who had hurt him. It allowed him to forgive them without adding any conditions at all. It is a lesson God wants all Christians to learn.

How does God teach you to learn to forgive? First, you need to be confronted about your struggle to forgive without conditions. How many of you automatically forgive the person who foolishly crashed their car into you? Or got your kids hooked on drugs? Or the thief who stole your car? Or could find it in your heart to forgive someone who raped you? Or show love to someone who inflicts pain and suffering in your life? Struggle with forgiveness? You’ve learned God’s first lesson for forgiveness.

God calls your inability to forgive people sin. It is wrong in God’s eyes to hold a grudge and withhold forgiveness. However, God has a second lesson he wants you to learn about forgiveness. God’s will isn’t to see a sinner perish. His will is to save sinners. He accomplished this by sending his son into the world to live, die and rise for sinners. God’s will to save you and sinners like you is made complete in Jesus. Jesus is your savior who wins forgiveness for your inability to forgive.

The second lesson leads to the last lesson God wants you to learn in your life. He wants you to learn to trust in his forgiveness to be able to forgive others. God’s forgiveness reminds you that you too have been forgiven of horrible things. He wants you to pass this forgiveness on to others. Joseph learned this difficult lesson and it is what led to the joyful conclusion, **“And (Joseph) kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.”**

The reason God wants you to forgive people who have wronged you is your forgiveness is a sign you trust his will. Your forgiveness says you trust God’s forgiveness is for all people. Even people who hurt you or wrong you. This is not an easy lesson to learn. You are going to fail at it over and over again. However, it is an important lesson God wants you to learn because forgiveness leads to joyful reunions. Both here on earth and forever with him in heaven. Amen.