

St. James UCC Havertown, PA

March 10, 2019 | Genesis 45:3-11, 15

Rev. Emily Garcia Livingston | “The Power of Forgiveness”

Today we celebrate the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is a 40-day season within the Christian Church Year, not counting Sundays, that begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday, the day before Resurrection Sunday. This season is a time of preparation for celebrating *Easter*. It is also a time of self-reflection and turning back to God. There are a variety of ways to observe Lent. Some people give up something special during the entire season or donate their time and/or treasure to a charity.

Conversely, some people *add* something to their daily routine instead of giving up something. This can be making time in your day to engage in mindfulness meditation or including time in your schedule where you are not connected to social media, the Internet or your smart phone. It could also be something as simple as reading the Lenten devotional daily throughout Lent. By the way, if any of you are members and you don't have a copy, please check your mailbox in the Narthex and if you don't see a copy there, give Ailene a call at the Church Office.

Life can be difficult. Our faith can waver. We *do* fall short. We are human, after all. And thank God for grace and mercy! Sometimes during Lent, people focus a great deal on their shortcomings, their sins, their failures, and they remain burdened and bound. Sometimes, folks forget that although Lent is a season of prayer, preparation, repentance, and self-reflection, we still have access to a risen and victorious Savior in Jesus Christ.

Today, we begin a preaching series called “Powered Up.” Throughout this series, we'll focus on the power found in several areas that can help improve or restore our relationship with God and other people. Lent is an opportunity for us to reflect upon our faith journeys and to “power up” as we remember Jesus' journey to the cross and the price He paid for our freedom -- both now and in the life to come.

Our topic today is the power of forgiveness. There is a great deal to share about forgiveness so I'll highlight only a few points in today's message. As I prayed about this series and the topics that would carry us through the beginning of Lent, the story of Joseph and his brothers came to mind. This story is rich with many lessons. We could spend weeks studying this family. If we think that the story is simply about forgiveness, we have overlooked the complexity of the human condition.

This story demonstrates that we are multi-layered and dynamic. It reveals that we can be deeply impacted and shaped by how our parents relate with one another and how they relate with us. It reveals that we are also shaped by how our relatives relate with one another and with us. A mental health professional with expertise in Dr. Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory would have rich content if using this story as a case study.

So, what exactly happened to Joseph? And what is this evil that both his brothers and Joseph speak about in the text we read this morning? Well, I'm glad you asked! In chapter 37 of Genesis, we find that at the age of 17, Joseph is thrown into a pit and sold to human traffickers by his own brothers because they hated him. His brothers covered-up this wicked deed by making it look like Joseph was killed by a wild animal. His brothers deceived their father, Jacob, who believed that Joseph was shredded apart into pieces and he mourned for many, many days because Joseph was his favorite child and Jacob didn't hide his favoritism of Joseph from anyone.

In the meantime, Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt to one of the officers in Pharaoh's court. While God gives Joseph favor during this time, Joseph does suffer several things while in Egypt. Ultimately, he becomes a very powerful man in Pharaoh's court and he basically becomes the most powerful man in all of Egypt, only second to Pharaoh himself. Now while this is happening, there's a huge famine throughout the land and Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy grain. Little do the brothers know that they'll be face to face with their brother Joseph whom they sold into slavery decades ago. Little do they know that the tables have been turned and they are now in a position where they are seeking mercy from the one they despised. Joseph is wrestling with vengeance as he orchestrates a plan to bring them to their knees.

Joseph has carried the pain of being despised and rejected by his brothers for years and now his opportunity to kick them when they're down and out has come. But he doesn't do that...exactly. During this entire saga, we see several times where Joseph weeps. His pain is deep. His anger is justified. His sadness over what happened to him and that he has no relationship with his brothers is profound. He is wrestling with the feelings of unforgiveness that he's carried for so long. Joseph's pain is amplified even more so now that his brothers are actually in his presence and they don't even recognize him.

What can we learn about forgiveness from this story? The first thing we learn is that forgiveness is really hard to do. And I'll add that when it involves family, it can be even that much more difficult than if you're dealing with a friend or an acquaintance.

Forgiveness is hard because you have to confront your own emotions and your pain and who really wants to do that?? Forgiveness requires you to be vulnerable and that doesn't feel good. That hurts. And we see that so clearly with Joseph. The New King James version records that Joseph wept at least 9 times according to the narrative. And in all of this time, his brothers didn't have a clue as to the turmoil that Joseph was dealing with emotionally.

The second thing we learn about forgiveness is that it can be a long process. It's not necessarily a "one and done" type of situation. Often times, there are layers of healing that need to take place and that level of healing takes time depending on the size and depth of the injury. The Holy Spirit is able to heal us from within and get into the deepest layers of our being once we open ourselves to forgive.

Tied to this is that because we have memories, forgiveness does not mean that we miraculously forget the injury or what was done to us. Only God Almighty has the ability to forgive and forget. We are human beings with brains and memories. We could forget a wrong if we suffer amnesia or have a lobotomy, but most people don't experience that. We can know that we are making progress with forgiveness when the person who harmed us OR the memory of the scenario doesn't create feelings of anger, resentment, or malice within us.

A third thing that we can learn about forgiveness from Joseph and his brothers is that it doesn't require confession on the part of the one who harmed you. This is a difficult statement for many people to hear but it creates an opportunity for healing in people who have suffered harm at that hands of someone who is no longer alive. Our sense of righteous anger demands an apology. We want the offender to say "I'm sorry" and we want them to mean it. But you will never hear a confession or a "I'm sorry" if that person who harmed you is dead. What a sad situation it would be if we could never experience the power of forgiveness for a person because they passed on. Thank God that forgiveness does not require confession.

A fourth thing that we can learn is that forgiveness does not make excuses for the person who offended you nor does it minimize the harm that was done. Joseph told his brothers that although they did evil to him, God meant it for good. In other words, God's providence turned a horrible situation into something that would ultimately be a blessing for his brothers and Joseph, in the end. Joseph had a right to tell his brothers that what they did to him affected his entire life. And Joseph having the opportunity to say this to them after so many years was part of his healing.

How do we know when forgiveness is achieved? We see in this story that Joseph's brothers never really confess to Joseph what they did to him directly. They talk amongst themselves about the evil they did to him and they send a messenger to convey a similar message to Joseph after their father dies, but they never speak to Joseph directly and say "Forgive us for what we did to you" or "We're sorry for what we did." Yet, Joseph demonstrates forgiveness when he tells them that he will provide for them, when he comforts them and when he speaks kindly towards them.

It's interesting that we see these actions from Joseph at the very end of chapter 50, which is also the end of the book of Genesis. It shows us that Joseph's journey of forgiveness was a long and painful one and that he resolves his feelings towards his brothers by the end of the book of Genesis. The power of forgiveness comes through for Joseph. After holding on to the pain that was inflicted on him by his brothers, by the end of the story, we see compassion, generosity, and kindness – which are all fruits of love. The power of forgiveness allows us to love our enemies by forgiving our enemies.

Why is forgiveness so powerful? It has the ability to set us free from a life of bitterness, unhappiness, and pain. Many emotional and physical problems can be traced back to holding resentments or guilt about what one has done to another. Unforgiveness can eat away at our health and bring about illness and disease. I believe one of the reasons why God commands us to forgive one another is because God knows that unforgiveness is a very destructive force. It is toxic to our being and to our relationships. It can rob us of experiencing life to the fullest.

I believe another reason why God commands us to forgive is because God knows that we are incapable of living perfect lives and that we will stand in need of forgiveness by another at some point. If we are to live in community with one another, there must be forgiveness. If we are able to trust God with our anger and our pain and if we can make the choice to forgive a person who has harmed us, we are well on our way to living in peace.

As we see with Joseph, the journey of forgiveness may be very difficult; it may likely be very painful and we may never hear a confession or an apology; but it is so vital to our living in wholeness that we choose to forgive others who have harmed or offended us in some way. Trust and believe that God is able to do the heart surgery that is needed to heal us from things that have damaged and hurt us. I also believe that there are instances where we need to consider speaking with a mental health professional who can assist us in our journeys of forgiveness so that we can be healed. Let us trust God's

power to restore us and to enable us to forgive those who have harmed us that we may experience life more abundantly.

Amen!