

“Forgiving Family”

Date: April 7, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Genesis 50:15-21

Occasion: Lent 5, forgiveness series

Themes: Forgiveness, family

Joseph did not have perfect parents, or grandparents, or great-grandparents. In fact, his family would have kept a team of therapists busy for several lifetimes. Their story takes over most of the book of Genesis. Within this family story is the first use in the Bible of the word “forgive,” the theme of this Lenten study. And this family was certainly in need of it.

The story begins with Joseph’s great-grandparents, Abraham and Sarah, who set the unpleasantness in motion by sending Sarah’s stepson Ishmael away so that *their* son Isaac could be the favored child. This conflict is still seen in the relationship between the descendants of Ishmael and Isaac, the Muslims and the Jews.

Isaac married Rebecca, who gave birth to twin boys named Esau and Jacob. Now, Isaac loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob. Parents should not have a favorite child and the tension in this family led to a great deal of manipulation and intrigue, as Rebecca and her favored son deceived Isaac and cheated Esau, the oldest son, out of his birthright.

When Jacob married sisters Leah and Rachel and began having children with them, it’s not a complete surprise that he followed the long-standing family tradition of picking a favorite child of his own. That child was Joseph, the star in Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice’s musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

Joseph may have had three generations of Israeli patriarchs as his immediate ancestors, but their faith and God’s blessings did not make his family fully functional. In fact, they were quite dysfunctional. Being the favorite son did not make life easy for Joseph. In fact, it made it harder.

Joseph's story does make it easier to accept that none of us had perfect families. None of us had the perfect parents. There are no perfect parents, just as there are no perfect children or siblings. You didn't have them and neither did I. The first dysfunctional family was Adam and Eve and their sons Cain and Abel. This brokenness was passed down to the rest of us.

Joseph's father, very unwisely, played favorites with his children. Joseph was the baby of the family and he got special treatment. Dad liked him best, and his brothers knew it. One day his father gave him a very expensive multi-colored coat and it made his brothers furious with jealousy. And then Joseph told his brothers about a dream in which they had to bow down before him. Their resentment just grew and grew.

Until one day, when Joseph approached his brothers out in the field tending their sheep, they decide to kill him and pretend he was mauled and eaten by a wild animal. But they changed their minds and instead sold him into slavery. And so Joseph was betrayed by his family.

Joseph and his father Jacob had been inflicting wounds on his brothers for a long time: the coat; the excessive praise; the bragging; the dream. In response, the brothers inflict a huge hurt on him – almost killing him; then selling him into slavery where he did a little prison time.

In each of *our* families there are hurts, big and small. Family members can often hurt one another. Some of the hurts are little ones. Parents sometimes disappoint us. Sometimes their actions hurt us. Promises are broken. Parents work too hard and aren't around often enough. Children can be disappointed they didn't get enough love when they were growing up.

Siblings often don't get along. There can be sibling rivalry where

sisters or brothers are jealous of one another, or fight for their parent's attention. Sometimes it's just words and sometimes it gets physical. What about your parents or siblings? Did they inflict wounds that you still carry with you, or wounds that you've forgiven but will never forget? And what would they say about you? Have you hurt them in some way?

We've all got little hurts from growing up. Some may have seemed like boulders at the time, but only later did we realize they weren't such a big deal. Some of them we can even laugh about years later.

We can hold on to those hurts, letting the irritations pile up until we can't carry the load any more. But if we do, it's tough to maintain any relationship at all with our families. We've got to learn to say, "This may irritate me, but I'm going to let it go."

So, let's return to the RAP acronym. Yes, our parents may have disappointed us, yes our brother or sister may have irritated us. If we hold on to those resentments, they will spoil any chance of a healthy relationship with that member of the family. But if we *remember* our own shortcomings, *assume* the best about the other, and *pray* for God's blessings for him or her, we can usually get past the small things – even if they were done by your mom or dad or kid brother or big sister.

Then there are the bigger hurts from our family members that may be a little harder to let go of – hurtful words, disrespect, disappointment, and the slights you just can't shake off. Maybe you were ignored as a child by your parents, or compared to another sibling and made to feel as though you weren't as important.

When that other person realizes they have hurt you, and they ask for you to forgive them, those hurts can often be let go of relatively easy.

But if the person never says they're sorry, it becomes a lot harder. Sometimes the family member doesn't think they did anything wrong. Or

maybe they're convinced they were right, no matter what you say. Whatever the case, we pile up these stones of resentment between us, and the emotional barrier becomes a wall. How do we deal with it?

There are two ways to break down that wall. One way is for the other family member to understand what they've done and how it affects you. So you might need to write them a letter, and or have a conversation, to tell them how you feel hurt. It may help to go to see a counselor together to help facilitate that conversation.

Afterwards the other person may say, "I'm sorry. I didn't realize it affected you that way. I really do love you and I want to change." Or, they still may be unable to understand, and they're not sorry.

If that parent, brother, sister or child won't sit down and meet with you, you'll still need to figure out how to handle the pain and anger. You can try to tear down the wall yourself, perhaps saying, "This thing with my Dad does hurt, but it's not worth the cost of not having a relationship with him. I've got to let it go." Then you learn to forgive.

If you've been trying the RAP process, but it still doesn't seem to be working, you may want to add an **S**: *seek* to understand. With this additional step you do your best to understand what has shaped the other person and made them who they are.

When I learned that my Dad's father was an alcoholic and was abusive to my Dad's mom, I better understood why he didn't like to see anger being expressed in our household. He basically learned to stuff his anger, and that's how we were taught to deal with anger. It isn't the healthiest way, and I wish he had helped us in this area. But now I know why he couldn't. He did the best he could, based on his family of origin.

Sometimes seeking to understand the other person helps us to accept behavior that otherwise irritates us.

But then there are the really big hurts. There are people who have been abandoned by their parents. There are others whose parents beat them regularly, leaving bruises, welts and bloody wounds. There is incest. And in some families, there are children who, like modern-day Prodigals, take and take from their parents, even stealing money to abuse drugs or alcohol. Even as their parents tried to help, they were abusive in return.

These kinds of hurts are not the kind that will simply go away with a simple prayer. These kinds of hurts take time and effort to heal. Many people find help from therapy, working with counselors who assist them in analyzing and understanding what happened. Others get help from sharing their pain with close friends, or perhaps a support group.

For many, confronting the individual who wounded them is central to their healing and letting go. Whether or not the other person apologizes, confronting that parent or sibling empowers the person to begin to heal.

Many people find healing through prayer. Not a one and done, but a daily process of prayer. Every time the painful event is recalled, they bring it to God and ask for healing. It is much like chipping away at a giant block of granite. The pain doesn't go away quickly, but slowly, slowly healing takes place.

In each of our families, there have been hurts, big and small. Some we can let go of quickly and easily. We may have already forgotten them. Other hurts will take much longer. The cross teaches us that God can take the pain and suffering of our past, when we put them into his hands, and produce something beautiful. May we each find the forgiveness and healing we need. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book, *Forgiveness: Finding Peace Through Letting Go*, by Adam Hamilton. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012, pp. 102-122.