

August 20, 2017 – Annunciation Episcopal Church - 11th Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. Elizabeth Molitors

*“I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.
And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves,
because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.”
Genesis 45:4b-5*

If the story of Joseph and his brothers were a program you were watching on HBO or Netflix, and you went from last week's story to this week's story, you might figure you'd missed a couple of episodes. Well, in fact, you have – there are about 8 chapters that the folks who select the lectionary readings have skipped right over. Let's see if we can get caught up.

Last week, we heard about Joseph as the favored youngest child (at least that's how his brothers saw it). The older brothers go out to herd sheep, and Joseph, little brother-like, tags along after them. He wants to herd sheep, too. And apparently, this sends his siblings over the edge. Or maybe it was the cool coat that Jacob (also known as Israel), who was their dad, got for Joseph and not for any of the other kids. Anyway, Joseph catches up with the big boys, and that's it - they're done with him. So they come up with a plan. I know, says one - let's kill him, and throw him into a pit.

No, no, no, says another. Let's not kill him, but just throw him into a pit and we'll see what happens. That seems like a good idea, and they run with that. (And at least one semi-compassionate brother - Reuben - likes this option because he imagines he can rescue Joseph later, maybe after the other brothers have kind of forgotten that they left him in a hole.)

They throw Joseph into an abandoned well, a cistern, then sit down to eat, and

while they're eating, some Ishmaelite traders pass by, on their way to Egypt. The brothers have a collective brainstorm: instead of just leaving Joseph to die, they'll sell him off to the next group of traders. This plan not only gets rid of their annoying little brother, but it makes them a bit of cash, as well. Win-win. Oh, and it makes them seem like nicer guys - they *could* have killed him and they didn't! Because, well, gosh, he's family and all. Win-win-win. And so, when the next group of Ishmaelites comes wandering by, the brothers pull Joseph out of the well, sell him to them, call it a day, and head home.

In the intervening chapters – between what we read last week and the passages we just heard – a bunch of stuff happens. The Ishmaelite traders take Joseph into Egypt, and sell him off to the manager of Pharaoh's household, as a slave. Joseph does good work there, kind of works his way up the ladder, but then gets thrown in jail when the manager's wife, whose romantic advances he's been rebuffing, turns on him.

But, Joseph seems to do o.k. in jail. He befriends the jailer, and ends up in charge of the whole place. He gets to know the prisoners, including two members of Pharaoh's staff who have fallen out of favor with Pharaoh. One man was Pharaoh's baker, and the other was Pharaoh's cup-bearer. (Do you know what that is? I had to look it up. It's the person who tasted whatever Pharaoh was about to drink, to detect poison. Nice job.)

One night, the cup-bearer and baker each dream vivid dreams which Joseph interprets for them; the dreams, he says, are predictions about their futures – some of it good, some of it....not so much. When they are later released from jail, about to go back to work for Pharaoh, Joseph asks the cup-bearer to please remember him, and get him out of jail if, in fact, his predictions come true. They do, but the cup-bearer completely forgets about Joseph, until much later when Pharaoh has some disturbing dreams and no

one can interpret them. That's when the cup-bearer remembers Joseph and tells Pharaoh about his amazing ability to interpret dreams.

So Joseph is called back into service, specifically to puzzle out for Pharaoh what it is his dreams mean. Joseph interprets the dreams as foretelling a time of great plenty in Egypt and the surrounding lands, to be followed by a severe famine. Pharaoh begins making plans to protect his people, to store up food during the bountiful time to tide them over during the famine, and he makes Joseph his right-hand guy, in charge of collecting and distributing grain to those in need.

As our story picks up today, Joseph's brothers have come to Egypt, to buy grain, because the famine extends to where they live, too. They have an audience with Joseph, to make their case about their need for food, but they have no idea that this high-powered guy they're pleading with is the kid brother they sold into slavery 20 years before.

Now is Joseph's chance. He holds his brothers' fate in the palm of his hand. How shall he respond?

The theologian, Miroslav Volf, writes that when faced with the person or people who have injured or offended us, we have three possible ways to respond: with revenge, with justice, or with forgiveness. Revenge is not simply about an “eye for an eye” but goes one step further – if you injure my eye, I'll destroy you. “Revenge,” Volf says, “multiplies evil.” (*p. 161, Free of Charge*).

Justice attempts to be more measured, demanding a counter-balance against the offense. Retribution, in other words, like, an “eye for an eye”. Justice is said to “contain

evil” - to keep it in check – but it can also lead to a spiral of destruction, as we keep poking out one another's eyes in response to slight after mis-step after injury, whether real or imagined.

The third response is forgiveness, which “overcomes evil with good.” Volf argues that, “Forgiveness mirrors the generosity of God whose ultimate goal is neither to satisfy injured pride nor to justly apportion reward and punishment, but to free sinful humanity from evil and thereby reestablish communion with us.” (p. 161, *Free of Charge*) In other words, forgiveness values the restoration of the relationship above anything else.

Forgiveness is the path that Joseph chooses with his brothers. He doesn't send them away, he doesn't throw them in jail; instead, he makes sure to set them up so that they and their families and households will never fall into poverty, and will never go hungry. He forgives his brothers in person, but it's likely that the process of forgiveness has already been going on for a long time, inside of Joseph.

Forgiveness is something freely given by the person who has been violated, offended, or wounded, and it is, in no way, dependent on the actions of the offender (for instance, that person being sorry or making amends). Forgiveness isn't about saying that the wound didn't happen, or that it didn't hurt, or that the hurt didn't matter; Joseph, no doubt, suffered a great deal because of the actions of his brothers. But Joseph also found a way to be free, as the writer Marcus Borg puts it, from the bondage of old wounds. And being freed from that past, Joseph, thru the years, was able to see and accept and make the most of the goodness and opportunities that were presented to him – something he wouldn't have been able to do had he just been dwelling on the wrongs his brothers inflicted on him.

All of which makes the point that forgiveness is really not about saying words like, “I forgive you” to someone who has hurt you. Forgiveness doesn't even really need the offending person to be anywhere around. Forgiveness is interior work, it's a choice we make to let go of resentment, of anger, in order to embrace something new, something more life-giving. Forgiveness overcomes evil with love – smothers it – the same way that weeds are kept from growing in a garden bed where there's healthy ground cover and other plants that don't give the weeds a chance to take hold and flourish.

But while it's pretty easy to *talk* about forgiveness, and the good it does, and how our collective lives would be better if we all chose forgiveness over revenge and retribution, it's so much harder to do it in real life.

In the summer of 2003, in my former life in the corporate world, I was one of two people in my department selected to be laid off; I was told that my position was being eliminated, that it was for financial reasons, and that it wasn't personal. Still, though, I took it personally. I was angry and anxious – how was I going to pay my bills? - and I couldn't get over the fact that this awful thing was happening to me. I knew the person who had made the decision – my division vice president – and so, in my head, I directed all my resentment toward her. Every morning for a month, after fitful sleep, I woke up angry.

I remember reading morning prayer one of those mornings, from the New Zealand prayer book. One of the prayers recounts the story of Jesus on the cross on Good Friday, asking God to forgive those who were crucifying him, because they really had no idea what they were doing. I laughed, a little ruefully, at the image – sure, it was easy for Jesus to forgive; Jesus is Jesus; Jesus is God. Not so easy for the rest of us humans,

though, especially since I was convinced that my offender knew exactly what she was doing.

I thought about, wondered about, why was Jesus talking about forgiveness from the cross at all? If his executioners didn't really know what they were doing, they weren't really culpable, and wouldn't be judged for their involvement. And then it hit me: what if Jesus, in offering forgiveness, was doing so not to release his offenders, but in order to free himself from the bondage of old wounds – the hate, suspicion, and enmity that had dogged him through his entire ministry? What if forgiveness was a way of helping him jettison the things weighing him down, so he could get on with this new thing called resurrection?

I suddenly understood forgiveness in my own context. That I didn't have to wait for my offender to make amends or say she was sorry – because that was never going to happen – and she was likely sleeping just fine. That the anger and resentment I thought I was flinging out into the universe was really eating away at only me, like that old saying, about drinking poison yourself and expecting your enemy to die. That forgiveness wasn't a weakness or being a doormat or a sap; forgiveness didn't mean that everything was suddenly o.k. or that I approved of the way my exit was handled. Instead, forgiveness was my decision to not let injuries or slights or hardships dictate my life. I wouldn't let my energy be sapped by the bad things someone else had done, but would reclaim my agency and move on. Forgiveness made room for seeds of resurrection to be planted.

But beyond personal affronts, there are affronts and assaults against humanity: The bombing in Barcelona, white supremacists in Charlottesville chanting epithets against Jews and people of color.... There are manifestations of evil like this in our

midst, every day, which call for some sort of response. The urge to counter such offensive acts with revenge or retribution is strong: revenge and retribution seem tough, and we don't want anyone mistaking our reactions as weak or half-hearted or anything less than full-throated opposition to such dehumanizing violence. But revenge and retribution are not the paths to which we are called. We are called, like Joseph, to choose the path of forgiveness. Not as a means of letting perpetrators of violence duck accountability, but in order to overcome evil with love, to smother it, not allowing an agenda of hate and destruction to weigh us down, or dictate how we, as people of God, live and move and act in this world. *Amen.*