

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Genesis 45:1-15, “Choices to Forgive, Release, or Renew”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 2/7/2021**

Some of you have to think long and hard about the last time  
you really had to forgive someone.

Others, like myself, have to think long and hard about  
whether we are ready to choose to forgive.

And if we do choose to forgive? Then what?

It might be a surprise to find that choosing to forgive is actually the third step  
in the path and not the last. We’ll show once again the slide  
illustrating the fourfold path.

There is need for space to process what has happened to us  
and consider well what is needed to forgive,  
but the time does come when we much choose  
to forgive or get sucked into a cycle  
that results in more harm for ourselves and others.

For Joseph, the process of forgiveness was very long – many years.

But the time had finally come for him to make a decision:  
Was he to forgive or not?

It was within his power to exact revenge and utterly destroy his brothers.  
No doubt Joseph the dreamer had dreamed of what he would do –  
or could do – if this day ever came.

I read the shenanigans from the previous two chapters  
regarding Benjamin and Jacob and the silver goblet  
planted in their belongings  
as related to Joseph’s indecision about what he wanted to do.  
He was buying time and wrestling over his options.

But at last Joseph is faced with the possibility of his father’s death  
he can no longer handle the tension.

Clear the room, I have something to say only to these Hebrews!

His hollering and wailing were so loud that news of them spread  
throughout the palace even to Pharaoh himself.

These men had known Joseph as Zaphnath-Paaneah.

Now I don't know how you are with languages, but "Zaphnath-Paaneah" ...  
doesn't sound much like "Joseph."

So they had no inkling whatsoever that this could be their brother.

But in v. 3 Joseph says to them, "I am Joseph!"

A revelation like this can be hard to take in.

For these brothers it would be as surprising as someone rising from the dead.  
They cannot answer, nor believe their eyes and ears.

So Joseph invites a more intimate setting. "Come close to me."

And so they do. Imagine their wonder and tension  
as they take steps across this great Egyptian hall,  
surely ordained with massive pillars and images  
of Egyptian gods toward a man of great power  
dressed in the ornate garb  
of a high ranking Egyptian official.

When they had done so, Joseph says once again in v. 4,

"I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!."

Only then do we learn what decision Joseph has made regarding

their sins against him: "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 here ahead of you."

Joseph has clearly chosen to forgive.

This doesn't mean that his brothers have changed or are sorry.

He doesn't ask them why they did it, or request an apology.

Having told his own story and named his own hurt of being sold into slavery,  
he now simply states his personal framework for understanding  
what has happened – through the evil of his brother’s actions  
God was at work to save lives.

This is similar to the early church’s interpretation of Jesus’ crucifixion –  
the act of killing Jesus was an utterly evil thing done by human hands,  
and yet God subverted that evil for the purposes of good:  
to secure victory over sin and death.

Now, we don’t want to say that this means evil deeds are no big deal,  
because God uses them for good.

We do not say that remaining in an abusive situation  
is God’s will because God will use our submissiveness  
to change someone’s heart.

We must reject that thinking, and if you asked Joseph when he was in jail  
what the thought about his brother’s action,

I think you’d get a very different answer  
than we have here years and years later.

God does not support or endorse abuse or harm toward people.

And yet it is true that God’s goodness and love are so powerful  
and so creative that they have been shown (in some situations!)  
to produce beauty and hope even in the midst of terrible deeds.

Listen now to the testimony of Ben Bosinger, a man whose father had beaten,  
humiliated, and even tortured both himself and his siblings.

Ben chose to forgive his father one day while working next to him on a car engine.

He felt the lightness of a burden being lifted. But then, he writes,  
“years later I saw him again and he said something to me  
that felt hurtful and critical, and for a moment I wondered  
if the forgiveness had worn off.

Instead, I learned that I had an expectation that my forgiveness  
would magically turn him into a nice guy, a different guy, a better guy.  
And with this expectation I was making myself a victim to him  
all over again.

The magic didn’t happen to him. The magic happened to me.”

In the same way Joseph chooses to forgive and demonstrates that this choice has primarily produced freedom *for himself*.  
Joseph has not had to live in bondage or with a victim mentality.  
In choosing to forgive and expand his perspective to include God's larger purpose,  
Joseph is an agent for good in his own life and world.

The next paragraph expands on that basic sentiment, including an invitation for the whole family to join Joseph in Egypt to endure the famine over the next five years.

This goes beyond forgiveness and indicates a decision on the last step of the fourfold path which is to release or renew the relationship.

Joseph, by inviting his family to come live with him in Egypt and benefit from his newfound power and position, is clearly choosing to renew his relationship with them.

But we need to be clear: This was not the only spiritual, honorable, healthy, or good decision that Joseph could have made.

It is okay to look at a situation in which you have been harmed, to tell that story, to name the hurt, to choose to forgive and then to say,

“I also choose to release this relationship. I wish you well, but I don't think it's good for us to try to be in a relationship any longer.”  
As those forgiven by God who live with a forgiveness mindset we are not called to renew every relationship.

As we heard during our Homegrown Spirituality service in January, sometimes released relationships end up becoming renewed relationships later on in totally surprising ways.

We don't know what God will do, and we aren't closing off what God will do in the future. Instead we must choose to either release or renew the relationship based on where we are right now.

And Joseph chooses to renew – much to the relief of his otherwise destitute family!  
Looks like that dreams of all the siblings' sheaves  
bowing down to Joseph's sheave came true after all.

When Joseph has finished this incredible display of maturity and grace,  
he throws his arms around Benjamin and his other brothers,  
and they weep and embrace and kiss each other.

And the last line in v. 15 says, "Afterward his brothers talked with him."

I wonder how that conversation went?

"Well, hey Joseph, now that you've become a powerful ruler  
and we're coming down to join you ... well, throwing you into that cistern  
and selling you to the Ishmaelites feel like kind of a bad decision  
in retrospect, you know?"

However the conversation went, we know that their relationship  
was not the old relationship they had before.

The Tutu's write, "Renewing our relationships is how we harvest the fruits  
that forgiveness has planted. Renewal is not an act of restoration.

We do not make a carbon copy of the relationship we had  
before the hurt or insult.

Renewing a relationship is a creative act. We make a new relationship." (p. 148)

And so it will be for us. We hurt each other. We make mistakes.

We tell our stories and name our hurts.

And by God's grace we extend forgiveness.

Sometimes we will move on to new people and new place,  
but other times we will renew our relationships  
and invest together in something new right where we are.

We need this practice to be more apparent, more tangible,  
and more accessible in our world. We need to be a church  
that is open about rumbling through life together  
so that we can also be open about forgiving one another and demonstrate  
to our neighbors that we are not perfect, but that we have learned  
from God in Christ how to forgive and heal.