

First Presbyterian Church
Genesis 37:12-28, “Telling the Story”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 1/24/2021

“I think you should leave.”

“You can go to hell.”

“Well if that’s how you feel about it…”

“You know what?”

“It’s time that person got a piece of my mind.”

“If you have to be a jerk, maybe do that around someone else?”

“Oh, I don’t get mad – I get even.”

These are not just lines from movies or tv shows.

These are the thing we think and say to each other
within our family and friends, within the body of Christ.
I have said and thought some of these things,
and other I’ve had said to me.

We hurt each other.

At a personal level, we hurt each other.

And at a societal level, we hurt each other.

While there are important things to differentiate,

I do not believe that harm at the interpersonal and societal levels
can be cleanly separated from each other.

Each learns from, is informed by, and offers cover for the other.

Today’s headlines and social media feeds feature the word “attack”
with substantial frequency.

Can a society that inserts daggers as a national pastime
also learn to heal the lasting and painful wounds
that accumulate day after day?

What about a city? A neighborhood? A church? A family?

In the book of Genesis we have an extended exploration of a family
that hurt one another – the family of Jacob.

I'm tempted to say the family of "Jacob and Rebecka,"
but part of why they hurt one another is because
it was really the family of Jacob and Leah and Rebecka and Bilhah,
and Zilpah.

The sons of these four mothers developed alliances
and factions that we see play out in this story.

One of those sons – born to Rebecka – was named Joseph.

Joseph was the second youngest of the twelve boys,
and was his father Jacob's favorite son
– just as Rebecka was Jacob's favorite wife.

This favoritism was visualized in the ornate overcoat
that Jacob made for Joseph
– what is often referred to as a coat of many colors.

Favoritism hurts.

It also makes its way into dreams.

In the first part of chapter 37, Joseph dreams that he and his brothers
are cutting sheaves of grain when suddenly Joseph's sheaf stands straight up,
while all his brother's sheaves bow down to his own.

In another dream the sun, moon and eleven stars
(representing his father, mother and eleven brothers)
were all bowing down to him.

Not only does Joseph has these dreams, he tells everyone about them,
no doubt in the button-pushing voice that all younger siblings
learn to use from time to time.

So when Jacob sends Joseph many miles out into the countryside
to check on his brothers and their flocks,
the stage is set for these brothers to give back
some of the hurt they had been on the receiving end.

They see Joseph bumbling aimlessly through the fields
in his ornately woven coat from miles away.

Just the sight of him fills them with disgust.

They begin to plan what they could do with “that dreamer.”

It’s surprising how quickly murder rises up as an option.

“Let’s kill him and say it was an animal.”

But Rueben – Leah’s son, and the oldest of them all – can’t let that happen.

Neither can he side with Joseph entirely, so he proposes

merely abandoning him in a cistern and letting nature take its course.

Joseph arrives, they jump him, rip off that pretty jacket of his,

and toss him in an empty cistern, which is like a well

that has been sealed off and waterproofed.

All that revenge-taking makes a person hungry,

so they sit down for some food in celebration of their conquest.

Just then, they see some of their cousins – Ishmaelites.

The Ishmaelites and the Hebrews shared a great grandfather in common: Abraham.

Ishmael was the older son born to Abraham, but he was born

to a slave woman named Hagar. So he didn’t count. Neither did she.

And Grandma Sarah had both of them run out into the desert to die of thirst.

Only they didn’t – God saved them,

and Ishmael became the father of a great nation

just like his brother Isaac would.

So these Ishmaelites know how brutal things can get in Abraham’s family,

but they aren’t afraid to participate in it if they can make a profit.

They purchase young Joseph for 20 shekels –

apparently a fairly paltry sum in those days – and they head south

with him ... to Egypt.

If you’re Joseph at this point of the story, are you ready to forgive your brothers?

Of course not. What would it take for Joseph to forgive them?

As we follow this story along it takes many years

and numerous encounters before he can

come to terms with them face to face.

Recognizing that helps us dispel some of the myths about forgiveness.
Desmond and Mpho Tutu discuss this
at the outset of their *Book of Forgiving*.

Forgiveness is also not primarily about the person being forgiven –
it actually sets the person who has been hurt free from the person (or group)
who has hurt them.

Forgiveness is not a subversion of justice –
it doesn't mean people get away with doing terrible things.

Forgiveness is not weakness – it doesn't mean you lack the strength
to carry on with your wound.

It actually takes tremendous strength to forgive.

So much so that I believe the deepest forgiveness we experience
begins with God's empowerment
through receiving our own forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not forgetting – in fact, the first stage
on the fourfold path of forgiveness is telling the story.

We cannot forgive deeply until we have told the story
of what happened to us.

The book of Genesis shows us how it's done:

This is how you tell a story of being hurt.

One of the great things about the Bible is that it does this so well –
family secrets are laid bare and deep wounds are named for what they are.

Now, telling the story on the fourfold path of forgiveness
doesn't necessarily mean finding the person who hurt you
and telling *them* the story.

It can happen this way, but I'm sure you can see that this is a delicate matter—
most people will feel defensive when confronted with the fact that
they have hurt someone.

We can also tell our story in confidence to someone we trust
or we may even tell the story of our hurt to God
through prayer or journaling.

The Tutus share that for some people the story needs to be told many times
before they are ready to go to the next step of forgiveness.
This is not a quick fix kind of process, this is deep healing.

So I want you to consider: How have you been hurt? What happened?
Have you told anyone the story? Is the matter settled,
or do you need to tell the story again?

In reflecting on all of this, I've realized that if, as a pastor,
I want people to receive the forgiveness of God and extend
that forgiveness to others,
it stands to reason that I must also be
a practitioner of forgiveness in my own life.

I must repent from thinking of forgiveness as a single transaction
rather than as an ongoing work, a way of being.
I also must repent of thinking that the process of forgiveness
is only for the big moments of life.

The Tutus write, "When I have a forgiveness mind-set,
I start to see the world not through grievance but through gratitude."
What a gift!

And if we look at our angry, mocking, ridicule focused society
and see many who need to forgive and be forgiven,
do we not have to live in the way of forgiveness as the people of God?

So I invite you all to walk with me on this journey of the fourfold path—
not just for a few weeks, but continually.

Let us close with this reflection written by the Tutus:

*To whom shall I tell my story?
who will hear my truth
Who can open the space that my words want to fill
Who will hold open the space for the words that tumble out
in fast cutting shards
And the words that stumble hesitantly into the world
unsure of their welcome
Can you hold that space open for me?
Can you keep your questions and suggestions and judgments at bay
Can you wait with me for the truths that stay hidden behind my sadness, my fear,
my forgetting, and my pain
Can you just hold open a space for me to tell my story*