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“Come Closer”
Genesis 45:3-11, 15

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What does it mean to be a Christian? It's more than just coming to church on Sundays. It's more than saying the Apostles' Creed. It's more than praying the sinner's prayer. It's bigger than our political affiliation or our economic and cultural status. It's more important than the town we grew up in or the country we pledge our allegiance to. Being a Christian is not a thing that we do. It's a relationship that we share. A relationship with Jesus Christ. And what is the foundation of that relationship? It is God's reconciling forgiveness.

We know that forgiveness is the work of Christ. But forgiveness is not something that shows up in the New Testament out of nowhere. God has been about the business of forgiveness from the beginning. Consider Joseph. Except for Christ's own life, death, and resurrection, Joseph's story at the end of the book of Genesis gives us perhaps the most dramatic instance of forgiveness in the entire Bible.

As you may recall, Joseph was one of twelve brothers. He was the favorite son of his father, Jacob, and he knew it. And that made him pretty annoying to be around. It goes without saying that this was a dysfunctional family. One day, Joseph had a dream that all his other brothers would bow down to him and serve him, and he made the mistake of telling them about it. So what happened next? The brothers left him for dead in a pit. But one of them got the bright idea to make a little money off of him, so they brought him out of the pit and sold him into slavery. The brothers make up a story about Joseph being eaten by wild animals. Jacob, their father, grieves bitterly because he thinks his son is dead.

Years pass. Joseph is sold as a slave in Egypt. He does well in Egypt. As scripture says, the Lord was with him. He gained prominence there and eventually came before Pharaoh. Pharaoh, at this time, has been having strange dreams. Joseph, himself a dreamer, was also given the ability to interpret dreams. This talent was made known to Pharaoh, who was perplexed by his disturbing dream. He called for Joseph and Joseph then revealed to Pharaoh the meaning of his strange dream: a famine was coming. Pharaoh was so impressed that the spirit of God was with Joseph, that he decided to elevate Joseph's status. Joseph would be second in power only to Pharaoh. The kingdom of Egypt was at Joseph's control.

Under Joseph's leadership, the kingdom of Egypt was prospering even as the famine grew worse in the surrounding countries. Word got out that Egypt had grain, so Jacob, Joseph's father, sent his sons to buy some of it. Tensions are high. The brothers come to Egypt. You know, the same brothers who earlier had betrayed him. They meet with the Lord of the land. Little do they know, it's their own brother whom they sold into slavery. Joseph recognizes them immediately. Drama ensues. I urge you to read it if you haven't done so recently. It's gripping stuff.

But finally, we arrive at this morning's text. "Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?... Come closer to me... do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves... for God sent me before you to preserve life... you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there... And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked to him.'"

"Come closer," says Joseph. "Be near me." Even after all the hurt and all the pain. The loneliness of being forced to live in a foreign country against his will. Even after all the anguish that came from not knowing whether his father was dead or alive. After all this, Joseph still desires a relationship with his brothers! And then the grief of all those years of suffering come pouring out of Joseph as he buries his head in his brother's neck and weeps. Finally, he can release the hurt he's been feeling for all these years. That hurt which had been building beneath the surface. When I first read it, tears began to fill my eyes too. "Come closer," he says. "And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them."

It seems to me that there are two ways to read this story. The one that feels most natural to me is to read it from the perspective of Joseph. After all, Joseph is the protagonist in the story. When we read as Joseph, we are able to imagine his pain. We feel, in part, that deep sense of betrayal. That loss of a life he thought he would have. But when we read from Joseph's perspective, we also get to imagine ourselves as those who extend forgiveness. It feels natural. It ties the narrative up in a pretty bow. Of course Joseph forgives his brothers. It's the happy ending we expect. Forgiveness, from this perspective, is easy.

But there is another way to read this story. And perhaps it is the more helpful way for us as Christians to read it. This other way is to read it from the perspective of the brothers. When we put ourselves in their place, we experience the anxiety of coming before a powerful ruler begging for our lives to be spared. We feel helpless in the face of impending famine. As the brothers, we carry the heavy guilt of our sins. Every day we are confronted with the grief of our father, knowing that we deprived him of the love of his son. We are too blinded by guilt to recognize the face of our own brother, and when he reveals himself to us, we are too filled with terror to speak.

Forgiveness, to the brothers, is not the logical outcome. It is not the expected choice. For the brothers, seeing Joseph in a position of power over them is the worst possible ending to the story. They expect Joseph to take revenge. Retribution. It just makes sense. That's the way the world works, after all. Just look at the story of Cain and Abel at the start of Genesis. Now here we are at the end. Surely Joseph will have them killed for their sins. Revenge is the logical next step. Forgiveness is unimaginable. And yet, forgiveness is what they receive.

It's interesting that in the Joseph story, God is not a character. Throughout the book of Genesis, God has spoken with people. God walks with Adam and Eve in the garden. God tells Noah about the flood. God comes down and makes a covenant with Abraham. God meets Hagar in the wilderness and gives her something to drink. But Joseph doesn't get any of that. God is spoken about, but never heard or seen.

But maybe God isn't really as absent from the story as we might think. Maybe for this story, it is God working through Joseph. Certainly, it would feel that way to the brothers. "Come closer," says Joseph. "Do not be afraid... God sent me before you to preserve life."

Isn't this just like someone else we know? Doesn't that sound an awful lot like Jesus? Joseph acts, as one commentator says, as a "type and shadow" of Jesus in this story. You can hear Jesus saying, "Come closer. Though you do not recognize me yet, you are truly my brothers. And even though you have wronged me and hurt me and cut yourselves off from me, I desire nothing more than to be with you. To build back my relationship with you. To care for you. My desire for you is life, not death."

Forgiveness. It's the very foundation of the Christian faith. It's the cornerstone of our relationship with Jesus. Mercy. Grace. Reconciliation. We sing about it; we pray about it; we preach and teach about it. But just because we talk about it all the time doesn't mean we're very good at it. It's hard. After all, Joseph's forgiveness wasn't easy. If you read earlier in the story, you see how he wrestles with the desire to get his revenge. But instead he chooses forgiveness...

One Christian writer says that,

*"Forgiveness is a gift. It's revenge that's predictable. Revenge is the automatic, natural reaction to being hurt. Forgiveness is an entirely creative act. It comes out of nowhere. It is completely unpredictable. For most human beings, it is incomprehensible. It is as close as human beings come to creating something out of nothing — the same way God made the universe."*¹

Joseph chooses forgiveness because he has a relationship with the source of all mercy; God. His brothers had no concept of forgiveness because they had never experienced it themselves. Even after this encounter with their brother Joseph, where he forgives them and weeps on them and kisses them, they still don't understand it. In fact, in chapter 50, Joseph has to reassure them of his forgiveness again. They don't quite get it because it doesn't make sense to them yet.

Perhaps, in order to forgive, you must first know what it feels like to be forgiven. And here's the part of the sermon where I would tell you to go out and forgive one another as you have been forgiven. But we already know that. If we turn this story into an object lesson about the importance of forgiveness, then we've lost the point. This isn't a fable. It's the story of God's salvation for you, for me, for the whole world. In this story, we find God at work; Joseph was left for dead, but God wasn't done with him. A famine threatened to kill Jacob's family, but God wasn't done with them. Jacob's descendants would become slaves in Egypt, but God wasn't done with them. Moses, and Joshua, and Samuel, and David, and Elijah, and the prophets. God wasn't done, because from that big dysfunctional family, God would send forth his own son. Ephesians chapter 1:

*"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."*²

In Christ, that divine, creative forgiveness has been given to us. Each of us relates to Jesus as Joseph's brother. Together we have cut ourselves off from him. We've stripped him of

¹ (Hual, 2021)

² Ephesians 1:7-10

his garment and thrown him into the pit. And yet, there's Good News. He has forgiven us. He wants a relationship with us. Like Joseph, he says to us, "Come closer." He weeps over us and kisses us. All is forgiven. All can be restored because of the surpassing, overflowing, triumphant grace of God in Jesus Christ.

One preacher puts it this way,

"As long as we're placing our hope in the Christian's ability to [forgive], rather than in Christ's sacrificial [forgiveness] toward those who deserve anything but, we're lost. There is a stark mismatch between our near-infinite ability to talk about [forgiveness] and our ability to actually embody it. The starting point for human charity, come to find out, isn't being sufficiently lectured about it. [the starting point is] the receipt of charity when you're least disposed to expect it. Which is a long-winded way of saying, I'm grateful that God's grace is more than a position or a posture. It's a person."³

References

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³ (Zahl, 2021)