



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

2537 Lee Road
Cleveland Heights, OH 44118-4136
Telephone: 216-321-8880
Website: www.COTSumc.org

“Love Forgives”

May 22, 2022

Genesis 45:1-15

Rev. Andy Call, Lead Pastor

The story of Joseph features prominently in the book of Genesis. More chapters are invested in Joseph's story than in Adam's, Noah's, or Abraham's. It's a fascinating story filled with intrigue, suspense, and unexpected twists. To set the stage for the dramatic confrontation in our lesson for today, let me begin by offering a brief recap of the story.

Joseph was the favorite son of Jacob, one of twelve brothers. His older brothers resented the way their father doted on him, offering him special status, special treatment, even special clothes (the coat of many colors or long sleeves, depending on which translation you read). Joseph was always jabbering on about his dreams and visions, a unique gift that further widened the gap between him and his siblings. The day he told them about a dream that they would all bow down before him, they'd had enough. They didn't just get back at him – they sold him into slavery and told their father that he'd been attacked by wild animals and killed.

But Joseph's gift saved him. Not only did he *have* dreams; he also could interpret them. That gift would elevate his status as an Egyptian slave and eventually gain the attention of Pharaoh himself. Joseph proved himself wise not only in interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, but also in managing household affairs. In time, Joseph would become chief steward over the palace and the second most important man in Egypt – perhaps even the first, since he managed Pharaoh's resources and provided him personal counsel.

Because of his gift, Joseph foresaw a catastrophic drought that would devastate the entire region. He ordered the stockpiling of grain and other resources, allowing Egypt to withstand what surrounding territories could not. A year into the drought, a desperate Jacob dispatched his sons to purchase grain in Egypt to keep the family alive. Their journey led them with the other starving people to Joseph, though they didn't know it was him. How could they? They never expected to see him again, let alone like this. But Joseph recognized them.

Here was a moment of which Joseph quite literally had dreamt – his brothers, humbled before him, begging for their lives. It was such poetic justice. He surely must have been tempted to have them thrown in prison, or to send them away empty handed, or better yet, to sell *them* into slavery. Indeed, he toyed with them in the chapters leading up to the part of the story we are visiting today. But when the moment for retribution was before him, he couldn't do it. He revealed his identity to his brothers and embraced them. So overcome was he with emotion that Joseph's cries could be heard throughout the palace, even by Pharaoh.

Joseph had every reason to exact revenge. They had despised him as a child, resented his talent and his special treatment. They not only separated him from his beloved father; they sought to ruin his life. Were it not for divine intervention, he would have spent his years in misery and servitude. Joseph had the opportunity to turn the tables. He had the means. He had the power. But he couldn't do it. His love was simply too great. He forgave his brothers – and in so doing, he reunited his family, saved them from starvation, and set the stage for the series of events that would constitute Israel's family as the people of God.

It's a great story – one that has been told over and over again for centuries. Part of what makes it such an important part of the faith we pass down is that this story isn't just about Joseph and his brothers; it's also about God and us. Joseph had every reason to condemn his brothers, but his love was too great. In the same way, God has every reason to condemn us – for the wrong we do and the good we do not. Even when we want to, we can never be good enough on our own to presume to be part of God's family. But God invites us, anyway. God's love is so great that forgiveness and inclusion are always part of God's action toward us.

Grace is a word we use in church all the time – in fact, we use it so often that it can lose its meaning. But grace *is* amazing, precisely because it is not the way we're conditioned to operate. We're more inclined toward “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” which always sounds better when it's someone else's eye and someone else's tooth. *Forgive unconditionally? Fine for God, but not us.* We know we're supposed to be forgiving. But let's just test ourselves a moment; how do you feel when I mention January 6, Roe v. Wade, Black Lives Matter, the Thin Blue Line, Kyle

Rittenhouse, Nancy Pelosi, or the Pittsburgh Steelers. (Let me be clear: I'm not suggesting moral equivalency of anything on that list.) What I *am* pointing out is how our inclination is totally different from God's nature as described in scripture:

The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
(A)s far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:8, 10, 12)

God is described as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." That phrase is used so often throughout the Bible¹ that it becomes almost like a nickname for God. And if that's the God that we worship and serve, we should strive to follow God's example. We should be slow to anger, not have a hair trigger. We should be abounding in steadfast love, not outraged every time we open social media. We should learn to be merciful – offering mercy instead of retribution; and to offer grace, the amazing grace that doesn't repay hurt for hurt, but forgiveness when it is neither merited nor simple. And because we are all made in God's image, we all have the capacity to live and love this way.

Peter once asked Jesus how many times we should forgive someone who's wronged us, and from the tone of his question, it's clear he meant repeat offenders. "Seven times?" Peter asked. *Nice try, Peter, but not even close.* "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times," Jesus replied. Some translations say *seventy times seven*. Which is to say, a lot. More than any reasonable person would forgive. Why? Because God is merciful and gracious, and so should we be. Then Jesus told a story about a man who owed an enormous debt to the king. *The Message* says it was \$100,000. The Common English Bible says it was 10,000 bags of gold! Whatever the amount, the point is it was a lot. An unpayable sum. The king was going to throw the man in prison and sell off his house and send his family into slavery to make up for the debt. But the man begged for mercy, promising to pay it all back. The king was moved and let him go, erasing the debt. *The entire debt.* Who would do that? No sooner did the now exonerated man leave the king's presence than he ran into a guy who owed him ten bucks. He grabbed the debtor by the collar and demanded repayment. When he didn't cough it up, he had the man thrown into jail. *Nice fellow, that. Short memory, too.*

Why should we be forgiving? Psychologists and social workers can give a whole host of reasons. But here, in this space, as the gathered body of Christ, we need only one reason: because "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Who would forgive a debt so large it could never be repaid in a lifetime or a thousand lifetimes? *God, that's who.* God "does not deal with us according to our sins," but yearns to be in relationship with us, clearing our record of all wrongdoing, restoring us in relationship. You may think to yourself, "I'm a pretty good person. I've never done anything *that* bad. What would God have against me?" How many little acts of denial or betrayal do we commit in the course of our day, moments of indiscretion or resentment or hatred? How many opportunities to do good or to help others do we pass by because we're too busy, too distracted, too indifferent to get involved? Has our witness for Christ been gracious and inviting or judgmental and exclusive...or absent altogether? How many secrets do we keep hidden from our fellow worshipers, from our family and friends, from ourselves? Do we think God doesn't see, doesn't know? What's so amazing is that God knows it *all* and doesn't hold it against us. In spite of it all, God loves us with an everlasting love and offers us the gift of life. Not just to some of us – to *all* of us. The sweet woman from the library and the guy who cut you off in traffic. The one who says hi to you on your way in and out of the coffee shop and the neighbor who complains that your grass is too high. You on your best day and you on your worst day. And if that's the grace in which we stand, how dare we keep a ledger of the offenses against us?

As Joseph showed mercy and forgiveness, so God shows mercy and forgiveness to us. And in the same way, we who have been the beneficiaries of such amazing grace, are to pass that grace on to others. That's not to say it's easy; in fact, it's quite difficult. But God never promised us life would be easy – God only promised we wouldn't have to do it all on our own.

As those who know we have been saved by grace, it is a blessing to share that gift with others. As Christians, we are Christ's representatives in the world. For some, you may be the only Christ they ever see. Make sure the Christ they see in you is the one in whose grace we each stand, the one who forgives freely and loves without conditions. Amen.

¹ https://www.openbible.info/topics/god_is_slow_to_anger