



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# Forgive and Forget?

SCRIPTURE:  
Genesis 44:33-45:3  
Isaiah 43: 22-25

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June 26, 2022 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

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Joseph was one of 12 brothers, the second to the youngest, and the favored son, born to the favorite wife of his father Jacob. If that sounds dysfunctional to you that's because it is. Jacob demonstrated his favor by providing Joseph a coat of many colors, or as some translations read, a coat with sleeves. That would have been hard enough to take, but on top of this paternal favoritism, Joseph brags about dreams he has where his older brothers fall down and worship him. It was a bit much.

The brothers are met by a band of Ishmaelites. Seeing an opportunity, they sell Joseph as a slave. They take that coat of many colors, dip it in animal's blood and tell the old man that his favored son was destroyed by wild animals. Joseph becomes a slave in Pharaoh's house and through a plot with more twists than a John Grisham novel, Pharaoh makes Joseph second in command over all of Egypt. When famine strikes the region, Joseph is responsible for relief. His brothers, who had all but forgotten Joseph, are sent to Egypt by their father to buy food. These brothers—the same who sold Joseph into slavery—now stand before their younger brother Joseph, or rather bow down before their brother Joseph, a ruler in Egypt. Joseph recognizes them, but they do not recognize him.

Joseph grants them food. The baby of the family is Benjamin—also born to Jacob's favorite wife. In Benjamin's grain sack, Joseph hides a silver cup. The brothers leave, carrying grain and unbeknownst to any of them, a hidden silver cup. Joseph sends his servants to track them down, with an accusation that whomever is found with the stolen silver cup will be enslaved in Egypt. The rest can go free, but whoever has 'stolen' the cup belongs to Pharaoh.

The cup is found, of course, in Benjamin's sack

so he must become Pharaoh's slave. His brothers are free to go, but they can't, or at least they don't. They return to Joseph to beg for Benjamin's life. Judah pleads this way:

*Now therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father.*

*Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.*

Last Sunday we reflected on how something as basic to Christian faith as forgiveness can be a difficult thing to practice. In part because we must balance grace with accountability. It's not Christian to look at sin—the harmful, often painful ways we treat one another—and just turn our eyes and pretend everything is okay. No, we are called to be accountable for our actions.

But there is a limit to what accountability provides. So, we strive to let our engagement with the world be shaped less by what the world has done to us and more by what God has done for us. So, what does that look like?

To forgive means we limit how much the past controls the future. Philosopher George Santayana is known to have said, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Santayana views history as a teacher. We look to the past and let the successes and failures of the past inform us, that we might grow and improve. There

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is wisdom there. But this wisdom requires nuance.

If Santayana is worried we might forget our yesterdays, William Faulkner worries that is impossible. He has said, “The past isn’t dead; it isn’t even past.” There are moments of the past that not only serve as our teacher, but they invade the present in a defining fashion. We view the present through the lens of yesterday’s injury and the injury of days gone lives in us for a lifetime.

I was visiting my grandparents and my grandmother asked me to cut their grass. I said, “Sure.” She said, “You will have to borrow the lawnmower from the Jacksons across the street.” “Really?” “Oh, yes. Ours hasn’t worked for three years.”

I cut the grass with the Jacksons’ mower. I wanted to return it full of gas, so I went to my grandparents’ shed. There, I saw my grandparents’ lawnmower. The housing was rusted through. It was missing a wheel, and as my grandmother said, it hadn’t worked in years. So, I took it to the street so that the trash pick-up could haul it off. My grandmother thanked me and said, “Good luck with that.” A few hours later, my grandfather returned from work and the first thing he did was retrieve the broken lawnmower and return it to the shed.

I asked, “What are you doing?” “Well, you never know when you might need this. “But it doesn’t work.” “That’s true, but maybe the parts will be good for something.” “Well, it’s not like you can use the blade as a ceiling fan.” “No, but just in case.” You know why he could not let that go. He was a child of the Depression and that yesterday shaped every moment of his life.

There are moments in our past that we can never fully lay down. They travel with us, haunting us, and sometimes a new moment can touch an old hurt—bringing the pain of our yesterdays crashing into our present. The past isn’t dead; it isn’t even past.

You have to wonder what Joseph felt when his brothers stood before him. The same men who had sold him into slavery. The same men who had told their father that he was dead. These brothers who had held all the power, but now Joseph had the power. He could have enslaved them—eye for an

eye. He could have made them part of Pharaoh’s servants. But he doesn’t do that. He gives them food and sends them home. If the past isn’t even past, how did he do that?

One of the thinkers who has influenced my understanding of forgiveness is Miroslav Volf. The theological convictions of Miroslav Volf were shaped by his experience in the former Yugoslavia. As a Christian married to an American, he was viewed as a national-security threat. When people are afraid, it is not hard to be a national-security threat. In his book, “The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World,” Professor Volf shares his experience. He was aggressively interrogated. He was not tortured, but his interrogations were intense. They were led by a man Volf calls Captain G. Volf knows what Faulkner speaks of, for he said, years after the fact, “It was as though Captain G had moved into the very household of my mind, ensconced himself right in the middle of its living room, and I had to live with him.”<sup>1</sup> The past is not dead; it is not even past.

Volf, leaning on his faith and his trust in God, said the only way forward was forgiveness. And to forgive he had to forget the pain, forget the fear, forget the injustice, forget the yesterdays that controlled his tomorrow. He refused to let the past control the future. He describes this as ‘remembering rightly.’ It is living the way God does when God says: I will remember your sin no more. Volf says: When we carry yesterday’s pain with us, it skews our perspective and makes us vulnerable to do to others what has been done to us. “Victims will often become perpetrators precisely on account of their memories.”<sup>2</sup>

Joseph did otherwise; Joseph remembers rightly. He doesn’t treat his brothers as they treated him, but rather, he gives them food. He chose to let the past go.

I know you are thinking that I am ignoring part of the story—the part where Joseph sets up Benjamin. Plants the cup in his sack of grain. Maybe it’s payback, but I read it differently. Forgiveness requires not only a willingness to let some things go; forgiveness can be an act of imagination.

1 Miroslav Volf. *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, (2006) p. 6.

2 Volf, p. 33.

This is what I mean: When Joseph's brothers, who had treated him so unjustly, stand before him, he puts them back in that same situation. The younger brother is in trouble. He has placed the family in jeopardy and just like his brothers sold Joseph, maybe they will sell off Benjamin, too? After all, for all they know, Benjamin brought this on himself.

But Joseph imagines the possibility that his brothers will act in a way that is kinder than their past indicates. That's why I say it is an act of imagination. Joseph could have said, "I know these guys. I know better than anyone how they will take care of themselves. I know their selfishness and their meanness." But he doesn't do that. He gives them a chance to be better men than they had been. Joseph refuses to allow the past to shape the present and gives his brothers a moment to be better men. This is an essential component to the work of forgiveness.

One of the most dramatic expressions of such imagination was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Desmond Tutu was a giant in the anti-apartheid movement that began in 1959 and reached a crescendo in the 1980s. When apartheid fell, Tutu rejected the model of the Nuremberg trials and instead, established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He explains it in his book, "No Future Without Forgiveness."<sup>3</sup> The commission called for confession, truth-telling, and for all who told the truth of their atrocities, forgiveness would be granted. Amnesty. For Tutu, there is no future without forgiveness. In an interview on "60 Minutes" in 1997, Tutu talked about it this way:

**Bob Simon:** So, right now, you sense a national catharsis is happening.

**Tutu:** It's happening. It's not easy to open wounds. It's very painful. But if you do not want them to fester, you must open them, and cleanse

them, and then pour balm on them.

**Simon:** Archbishop, you are a man of the cloth.

**Tutu:** (smiling) Thank you for reminding me.

**Simon:** Don't you think that granting a murderer amnesty, which is some form of forgiveness, even if he doesn't repent, don't you think this is carrying Christianity a bit too far?

**Tutu:** Christianity has always been a religion that takes risks. We are saying people who have committed horrendous acts, demonic acts, monstrous acts, are not monsters, are not demons, they remain human beings. We don't say because you are a perpetrator, therefore you remain a perpetrator forever. We say there is a possibility of changing.<sup>4</sup>

Did you hear it? He is asked, "Don't you think this is carrying Christianity a bit too far?" Tutu responds, "Christianity has always been a religion that takes risks."

Forgiveness is always a risk because there is no guarantee that reconciliation will occur, that peace will come, even that all will be healed. But it is an act of theological imagination that allows the possibility that we can become a people that we have yet to be. That our yesterdays do not control our tomorrows.

It is the risk that Jesus took for us. Jesus knew the truth of us. He knows our past and yet he still said: You can forgive 77 times. You can go the second mile. You can love one another as I have loved you. You can live justly. You can be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He never stops calling us to that promised day.

When it comes to people, us and others, we are to be honest about who we are but also imagine how the power of God's love can shape us. So, to play with Faulkner: The past is not what defines us; no, we are defined even now by a promised day that, bit by bit, is already showing up in us. And that will take some holy imagination.

<sup>3</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, (1999).

<sup>4</sup> Desmond Tutu and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *60 Minutes* Archive on YouTube.