

Epiphany 7C 2019, Luke 6:27-38, February 24, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

I can't think of a better story to illustrate Jesus' command to love one's enemies and forgive those who have done wrong to you than the story of Joseph and his underhanded brothers from the book of Genesis. It's such a great story, and one of my all-time favorites from the Bible because it reveals what is so true about human nature and the powerful force of forgiveness. Some of you grew up hearing the story of Joseph in Sunday School. But others may not be so familiar, so it bears repeating the outline.

Joseph was among the twelve boys born to Jacob. Jacob was the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham, whom God promised a land and many descendants. Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons. To show his favor, Jacob made Joseph a luxurious coat, the famous "Technicolor Dream Coat" of the musical's title. Joseph was a dreamer and interpreter of dreams. One day he dreamed that sheaves of wheat owned by his brothers bowed down to his sheave of wheat. The dream so enraged his brothers they resolved to kill Joseph. But just as they were about to do him in, they sold Joseph into slavery. The brothers then smeared his coat with blood and took it back to Jacob, and told him that Joseph was dead after being attacked by wild animals and killed.

Meanwhile Joseph eventually ends up in Egypt. He is imprisoned under false charges that he tried to seduce an Egyptian official's wife. While in prison his reputation as an interpreter of dreams comes to the attention of the Pharaoh, king of Egypt. He interprets a dream of Pharaoh predicting seven years of abundant harvests, followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh is so impressed with Joseph that he makes him second in command of all Egypt, to gather in surplus grain during the good years, in order to prepare for the seven harsh years to come.

During the years of famine people from all over the Middle East migrate to Egypt because of their stored food supply. Joseph's brothers also come to Egypt for food. Joseph recognizes them but they do not recognize the now powerful Egyptian ruler as their brother. Joseph plots to test them. He secretly places a silver cup in the belongings of Benjamin, the youngest of the brothers. When the cup is found Joseph plans to punish Benjamin. But Judah, the eldest brother passionately pleads for Benjamin's life, offering to take his place in punishment. Joseph can no longer contain himself, sends everyone out of the room and reveals himself to his brothers.

Joseph revealing himself does not immediately bring joy to the brothers. They fear that the one they sold into slavery, and now the second most powerful man in Egypt, could easily punish them and get his revenge. From the standpoint

of justice that would be Joseph's right. Joseph chose a different path. He chose the way of forgiveness.

Forgiveness in the face of real hurt and wrong is a radical, and seemingly un-natural response. A more natural response to extract that pound of flesh; an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. We respond instinctively, approvingly, when someone says, "you strike me, I hit back harder." When we hear Jesus say, "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also," we hear it as unrealistic, idealistic, unsuited for the real world.

We forget the whole of Jesus' life is to turn what we believe is right upside down. We assume forgiveness is un-natural; that's its too hard. But Jesus' life reveals that what the world believes is natural; do to others as they do to you, if someone strikes you strike back even harder, is in fact un-natural. This is not the way of God. This is what Joseph tells his brothers. And its what Jesus tells us.

I think though that sometimes Christians do operate with an unrealistic notion of what constitutes true forgiveness. Too often we believe forgiving someone who has wronged us means just forgetting about it. "Forgive and forget" is the expression we use. Or we may assume that forgiveness means a passive response to wrongs committed against us. But forgetting the wrongs or simply being passive to them is not the same as forgiving. Forgiveness involves an active, and quite conscious decision of the heart and life.

Consider the story of Mark and Jenny. This story appeared in an issue of the Living Lutheran magazine. In 1986 the 18-year-old Mark broke into his ex-girlfriend's home in Iowa, and brutally stabbed her to death. He was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison with no possibility to parole. Vicki, Jenny's mother, didn't believe the punishment was sufficient. She argued passionately for the death penalty. She fantasized about performing the execution herself. Bitter anger consumed her life. Eight years later she was given the opportunity to see Mark in prison as part of a Victim-Offender Reconciliation program. When she saw him she railed against him for destroying her life. But something happened. She began to see Mark, now locked up in prison forever, that his life was essentially over. Vicki began to ask her pastor, counselors, friends, about sin and forgiveness. She began to pray for Mark that he would find some purpose in life, even though in prison. Slowly her anger and hatred began to recede. Finally, after 13 years, Vicki approached Mark and forgave him for the evil he committed. "Forgiveness freed me," she says. "My healing from grief and depression accelerated after that meeting with Mark. It's wonderful to be rid of the anger and bitterness. My life can't be put back together, but I don't have to diminish the life I have left by living with emotions that destroy me."

It's almost impossible for me to imagine being able to forgive someone who commits such an evil. But through the work of the Holy Spirit Vicki was brought

to the point. She did not just forget about the terrible wrong committed against her. How could anyone forget? To do so would be to dishonor the memory of her daughter. And she wasn't merely passive about this wrong. It required the hard work of seeking another path. The rest of the world says, "Lock him up and let him rot, he is nothing but an animal." Forgiveness involves a creative response, an openness to a new word from God, a word that may be too painful to bear at first. Authentic forgiveness cannot be rushed. Legitimate feelings of anger and pain must be attended to. The work of forgiveness may lead us down paths we would never expect to go. But if we are to find freedom from the soul-robbing effects of holding onto anger and bitterness then hearing that word of forgiveness and being willing to act on it needs to be the first step.

A willingness to start forgiving begins when the heart is transformed by the words and life of Jesus. "Forgive, and you will be forgiven...a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." Amen.