

February 22, 2004

"I AM JOSEPH, YOUR BROTHER"

Genesis 45:1-15; Luke 6:27-38

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Greed, avarice, jealousy, family conflict that escalates into family violence, sex, power politics, palace intrigue: it's the stuff of soap operas and movies. The story of Joseph in the Bible has it all. It's a long story, ten chapters of Genesis, a disturbing story about some disturbed people. It's a story about human nature and, like many of the biblical stories, teaches that the women and men of the Bible are very people — just like us.

Nevertheless, the story affirms over and over that God was at work in this disturbed and disturbing family. But I'm getting ahead of the story. Some of you know the story. Be patient while I fill in the blanks for those who don't know it.

Joseph was one of twelve brothers. He was the second youngest and his daddy's favorite boy. He was also the son of his daddy's favorite wife. You can see the trouble coming already!

Joseph was a homeboy who hung around the kitchen while his older brothers ran the family farm. And, of course, the brothers resented this daddy's boy who avoided hard work in the fields.

Joseph flaunted his status. And he had very interesting dreams about his brothers. In his dreams he was always a winner and his brothers were losers. Joseph enjoyed telling his jealous brothers about his dreams. Resentment turned to hatred, the story says.

One day, Joseph's father sent him over to the next county to check on his brothers and the sheep and cattle they were tending. He wore his favorite coat, a flashy multicolored coat tailored especially for him by his father.

The brothers saw the coat in the distance and knew who was coming. Now was their chance, they thought. They could get rid of this little monster once and for all. They decided to kill him. One of the brothers, Reuben, convinced the others that wasn't a good idea. So, they decided to sell Joseph to a slave trader who happened to be on the road nearby. Then they killed an animal and soaked Joseph's famous coat in the blood, went home and told their daddy that his favorite son had been killed by wild animals. It seems they were the real monsters.

Joseph ended up in Egypt as slave to a government official named Potiphar. Joseph distinguished himself in Potiphar's service and became an important man in the household. He managed the estate and the family businesses.

Potiphar's wife liked Joseph. In fact she decided she wanted him to be her boy-toy. He said No. She cried, Rape. Joseph ended up in prison with a very long sentence.

In prison, Joseph distinguished himself again. He had more interesting dreams — some of them about the future, dreams that came true. Pharaoh was impressed and had Joseph released into his service. Joseph distinguished himself again. Eventually he became what you might call the Minister of Agriculture, Minister of Welfare and Minister of Strategic Planning all wrapped up in one office.

Joseph noticed that cyclical famines devastated Egypt. He planned for the future. He stored up enough grain to last through the next famine cycle. Sure enough, famine came and people from all over the region came to Joseph for food.

Back home, Joseph's family was starving. Daddy heard about the grain in Egypt and sent some of the sons to buy food. They appeared before Joseph. He recognized them. They did not recognize him.

Joseph played a series of nasty tricks on his brothers while supplying them with food. Each trick caused the brothers to fear this whimsical and unpredictable Egyptian official. But they needed food and kept coming back wondering if they'd get home alive.

Finally, it was showdown time. Tired of playing games, Joseph decided to confront his brothers. It looks like it was time for revenge — at long last. Imagine the revenge games Joseph thought of all those years of suffering. Now these monsters were in his power.

Joseph gathered all his brothers in his office then sent his aides out of the room. What now? the brothers wondered fearfully.

To everybody's surprise, including the reader of the story, Joseph began to cry. He wept so loudly his aides could hear him in the next room. His brothers must have wondered if this strange man had lost his mind.

Finally, Joseph composed himself enough to speak. I am Joseph, he said. His confused and frightened brothers didn't understand.

Come closer, Joseph told them. Hesitating, they came closer. I am Joseph your brother. Oh boy, the brothers thought. Life as we've known it is over!

Fear not, Joseph said. I will not take revenge. In fact, what you meant for evil, God has turned into good. God's hand has been with me all the way. Look, here I am saving your lives!! Bring Dad here as quickly as you can. You can live here and I'll take care of you.

Then Joseph wept again. He threw his arms around his brother's and they all wept tears of forgiveness and reconciliation.

The meaning of the story is clear. Joseph keeps telling his brother (and us), Look at God working in all this tragedy, turning evil into good, making bad things into good.

But there's a sub-theme at work, too. This story joins all Scripture in affirming that the power of love is greater than the power of revenge. Joseph also shows us that forgiveness, which certainly is love's most difficult work, is also love's most powerful work.

You don't need me to tell you that forgiving love is in short supply these days. There's not enough forgiving love in Baghdad or in Washington, D.C. There's not enough in Jerusalem or Damascus. And there's not enough in America; not enough forgiving love in Minneapolis and, forgiving love is in short supply in Christ's churches.

Notice also that the power behind Joseph's forgiving love was his deep trust in God's power to heal his hurts, to make things right, to vindicate his cause in the end. Only the conviction that God can and will make undeserved evil into something good can create forgiving love.

That's why Jesus teaches us: If you want to be my follower you must love your enemies. Then Jesus adds several ways love of enemies works: Do good to them. Bless them. Pray for them. Turn the other cheek. Give in. Don't resist.

Then Jesus adds what we call the Golden Rule. Note that it's in the context of how we treat enemies! Do unto others as you would have them do unto you! Treat everyone, including people who hurt, you like you'd like to be treated. Ouch!

There's more. Jesus then said, Don't judge them. Don't condemn them. Forgive them. Then a saying almost always taken out of context — usually just before the morning offering. But it's about forgiving love, Give [forgiveness] and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give [forgiveness] will be the measure you get back.

That's the word of the Lord: nonnegotiable and with no guarantees or payoffs attached — except more grace to forgive.

Jesus doesn't give answers to the grave problems of statecraft nor monstrous injustices. What he does say is that in this world full of hurts we don't deserve, healing is possible. We can cut loose the heavy loads of anger, hurt, revenge and guilt we haul through our lives.

The film, *The Mission* illustrates the power of forgiving love. The story takes place in the 18th century in a remote South American village in the mountains high above a series of waterfalls. The only way into the village is the long and dangerous climb up the rocks of the waterfalls.

A priest, played by Jeremy Irons, has settled into the village and started a church. The village is being transformed by the gospel.

But a terrible evil plagues the village. A vicious slave trader, Rodrigo Mendoza, played by Robert DeNiro, repeatedly comes to the village, captures people and kills some for the mere sport of it. He sells his captives as slaves in the nearest colonial city.

Mendoza is so twisted he kills his own brother over a girl. In prison he comes face to face with himself and realizes the monster he is. He won't eat or talk. The priest from the mountain village comes to visit him and offers him penance and redemption if he'll come back to the village to serve the people there. Mendoza says, I'm beyond redemption.

Finally, the priest convinces Mendoza to come with him. His penance is carrying his armor, the tools of his horrible trade, in a net attached to him by a long rope. Up the rocks they begin to climb. In the film the scene is eight excruciating minutes. Mendoza falls and gets up, he's dragged down by his heavy burden but keeps coming back. Ahead, at the top, is the village of people he tormented.

Watch a short scene from the film — a picture of forgiving love.

[The clip shows Mendoza finally get to the top and the village. The villagers see him coming. One runs with a knife and holds it at Mendoza's throat. Instead of killing him the villager cuts the rope holding Mendoza's armor and rolls it off the cliff into the river far below. Mendoza begins to weep and the villagers come to embrace, forgive and welcome him.]

What load are you carrying today that needs to be cut off your soul? What hurts, anger, revenge are you hauling through life? What do you need forgiven for? Ask God. God always cuts the load of guilt away.

Whom do you need to forgive? An enemy? A friend? A church? God? Yourself? Forgive and you will be forgiven. Forgiveness is a grace received to be given away.