

“The Theory of Relative Forgiveness”

This is where the healing begins, part 3

Genesis 45:1-15

Welcome this morning. It is so good to be back here in church on another beautiful Sunday. Before I get into my message this morning, I owe you a word of explanation. The reason I was gone for a week at the end of August was for a Sabbath retreat, alone. I had more than a few people confuse my wife by asking her, “How was your vacation?” A Sabbath retreat, as opposed to a vacation, is an intentional time away for resting, reading, and communing with God. God bless my wife, because she took excellent care of our children here in Houghton without me. I owe her a Sabbath retreat now! As a family, we have not yet taken a vacation this year, but we look forward to Thanksgiving and Christmas when we will be able to visit family. If you got the bulletin this morning, you also see that I take Fridays as my weekly “Sabbath day” – another time of intentional rest. I hope to set a good example to you all, so that you also take the time you need to rest and commune with God.

I also want to mention two opportunities for spiritual growth. On Tuesdays at 10 am, we have started a covenant prayer team here at Grace UMC. We can even make the meeting available on conference call. On Thursday mornings at 9:30 AM, I am leading a Bible study at my other church, Painesdale UMC. Both of these meetings are open to all, regardless of what church (if any) you consider home.

Would you please pray with me? Father God, this is your house and this is your day. We are here to hear the word from you. Send your Holy Spirit down on

us and teach us how to be the church and spread the gospel to all. We pray this and Jesus name. Amen.

Turn for a moment and tell your neighbor, “I love you like a brother or a sister.” And if the person sitting next to you happens to actually be your brother or sister, and just tell them “I love you, brother,” or, “I love you, sister.”

How many of you here had the good fortune of growing up with brothers or sisters? I myself have two brothers. And like many of you, I had some fights with my siblings while we were growing up. What is it about families that makes us get on each other’s nerves so much? It probably has to do with proximity. Unlike friends we may see every once in a while, we live with our families, which makes it really hard to get away from them.

Did anyone here have sibling rivalries? What do you think caused them? For some we might claim that our parents played favorites. Was one of your brothers or sisters “perfect”? Were they the one who could never do anything wrong in your parent eyes? If so, you may very well resonate with our story this morning.

For the past few weeks, we have been talking about various types of healing. Today I want to focus on the fact that God wants our families to be reconciled. This is not some “pie in the sky idea.” I know that there are some crazy families out there, mine included. So allow me to tell you the story of Joseph’s family, and then ask you if your family was ever as crazy as his.

Although our scripture reading came from Genesis 45, the whole story is actually covered in 11 chapters, and it would probably take you 30 minutes to read it all at once. I am going to just give you the “Cliff notes” version of the story of Joseph, one of my favorite in the bible.

Joseph grew up as the oldest son of Jacob’s favorite wife. Joseph was clearly daddy’s favorite. Jacob even had a special robe made for Joseph, marking him as the favored one. As if this was not enough to aggravate his other eleven brothers, Joseph then had the arrogance to tell his brothers about his dreams. In one dream his brothers were harvesting grain, and as they gathered the wheat into sheaves, his brothers’ sheaves bowed down to the one Joseph that made. In another dream, Joseph saw the sun and the moon and eleven stars bow down to him. And of course, he had to shoot his mouth off about these dreams in front of his whole family.

Papa Jacob saw all of this happening and didn’t do anything to prevent these rivalries. As a father, he never addressed the turmoil. Finally, Joe’s brothers had had enough. They let their anger get the best of them. They grabbed Joseph, ripped off his coat, threw him down an empty well, and sold him to some slave traders. Then they faked Joseph’s death. They tore his coat, soaked it in animal blood, brought it back to his father and allowed him to conclude that Joseph had died in a brutal attack.

Sure, my brothers and I have had some loud arguments, but we never treated each other like that! How do you think Joseph felt? This was not some practical joke. His brothers’ hatred was real. They didn’t care what happened to him. In their minds, Joseph was dead. As we learned last week, you don’t have to physically murder somebody to kill them in your mind. What would it feel like to have your own siblings abandon you? Sadly, for some of you, you probably don’t have to imagine. You feel for poor Joseph! But wait, there’s more bad news.

Joseph did not actually die. Instead, he was sold as a slave to a man named Potiphar, who worked for the pharaoh in Egypt. Joseph tried to make the best of

the situation, serving Potiphar well. Everything seemed to be going to fine, until Joseph was falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife. So Joseph went to prison, where he again worked as hard as he could.

While Joseph was in prison, he met two men. One was the pharaoh’s baker, and the other was the pharaoh’s wine taster. Joseph interpreted their dreams for them. The baker was hanged, and the wine taster was restored to his former job. Joseph hoped that the wine taster would put in a good word for him, but instead the wine taster forgot about him.

The Bible doesn’t say how long Joseph was in slavery and in prison. The beginning of chapter 40 only says it was “some time later.” Even after he interpreted the wine taster’s dream, he was still in prison for another two years. I wonder if he got bitter. I wonder if the scene with his brothers played over and over again his mind. I wonder if he prayed to God. I wonder if he despaired. We have to realize what I’ve told you in five minutes actually occurred over a span of many years. What would you have done in those long, hard years?

Well, in due time the pharaoh had a dream. And this time the wine taster did remember Joseph. Joseph was called in to interpret the dream, which he did. Joseph predicted there would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, and the only way to survive would be to store up the food from the good years so that it would last during the bad years. Realizing Joseph’s gift, the pharaoh put him in charge of Egypt. So after all these ups and downs, Joseph was at large and in charge in Egypt.

Of course, Joseph’s family was not immune to the famine. Jacob eventually sent his family down to buy grain, but he refused to send Joseph’s younger brother, Benjamin, with the other boys. When they got there, Joseph recognized

them immediately, but the brothers did not know who he was. This is where the story gets interesting. Joseph did not reveal himself immediately, and started playing tricks on his brothers. He took one of them and put him in prison. As the other brothers were leaving, he secretly put all their money back in their travel bags. He was messing with them. Sure enough, on the way back home, when they found all this money that they thought they'd paid with, they said to each other, “This is because of what we did to our little brother.” Their guilt came back in all of its full, ugly power.

Time went by, and Jacob's family once again needed to buy food. This time they did bring Benjamin with them. And when Joseph saw Benjamin, Joseph broke down and wept. He had dinner with his brothers, playing one last trick on them. Joseph hid his own silver cup in Benjamin's sack. As the men left town, Joseph sent the guards after them, pretending to discover the cup missing. The brothers of course claimed their innocence. They made a rash promise, “We are so sure that we don't have this cup, that if you find it in one of our sacks, you can go ahead and kill that man.” Of course they found it in Benjamin's sack. And then a wonderful thing happened: Judah said to Joseph, “Don't kill Benjamin. Take me instead.” This final act of sacrificial love revealed to Joseph that his brothers had really changed.

Finally we reach the part of the story we read this morning. Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. He weeps with them. He forgives them. He says, “What you intended for evil, God used for good. God sent me here, not you.” (Genesis 50:20 and 45:7)

How long did it take Joseph to realize what God had done? Ten, twenty years? When did he let go of his bitterness and forgive his brothers? When did

he realize that God could work a miracle in his life? How many years and how many disappointments did he have to work through?

You see, Joseph had a choice. He could have had his revenge. He could used his power to get even with his brothers. But instead of getting bitter, he got better. Joseph wanted to see his brothers again, badly. Look at how he broke down in front of them and reconciled with them.

This is a perfect picture of what God wants to do in our families. I am not saying that God wants us to pretend to kill each other. God does not want us to have dysfunctional families. God does not want us to tolerate and condone abuse. No. God’s plan is for us to live in healthy families. Whole families. Reconciled families.

We live in a broken world. There are no perfect families. We know that every single one of us has sinned against God and each other. And like Joseph, we have been separated from the relationships that God planned for us, both with God and with each other.

God created us for his family, and we decided to leave. But in spite of our misbehavior, God had a plan to save us and win us back. He saved us from the famine of living outside of his grace. But unlike Joseph, God doesn’t test us. He offers us his grace freely, because his son Jesus has already won us back.

This is a story about reconciling, a story of rescuing. The moment where Joseph weeps over Benjamin and his brothers is my favorite part. This is exactly where our families can be, by the grace of God, forgiving each other and embracing each other. This is where God wants us to be. Forgiven and embraced by God.

It is not easy to forgive your family, especially when the hurt runs deep. It is not easy to let go of your thirst for revenge. Then again, it's not easy to understand how God can forgive us. All I know is, God loves perfectly. This story is as much about us and our families as it is about Joseph and his brothers. How far are you willing to go to experience that moment of joy, when you realize forgiveness in your family and relationships?

Because Jesus went to the cross for us, that means grace is available to us in any situation. Grace that surprises us, stuns us, and overwhelms us. Grace we can experience firsthand. Grace we can see with our eyes. Grace we can hear with our ears. I pray that in our families and in our church, we will show the same grace and forgiveness than Joseph showed his brothers.

(enter into time of communion.)

Memory Verse:

1 Peter 4:8 – “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.” (NIV)

Reflection questions:

1. How would you describe your relationship with your siblings? (Or your nearest relatives?)
2. Which is easier for you to forgive: family, friends, or strangers? Why?
3. Describe a tragic hurt that God used for good in your life.
4. How will we, the Church, allow the story of God's grace to break through our lives and rescue those around us?