

In Genesis, Ch. 37, Joseph was a boy of 17, and lived in Canaan with his family;  
he was the youngest and most favored son of his father Jacob,  
who loved him more than Joseph’s other brothers.

Joseph was given a beautiful long coat of many colors by his father,  
which none of his brothers had ever possessed.

God had bestowed upon Joseph the gift of interpreting dreams;  
but as a result he became self-absorbed, arrogant, and rude,  
and boasted that his dreams revealed he would someday have dominion  
over his brothers.

The older brothers were outraged, and overcome with jealousy.

They could barely speak to him,  
and as he continued to be impertinent toward them,  
their jealousy grew into murderous hatred.

One day, while tending sheep in the wilderness,  
the brothers conspired to kill Joseph,  
but then decided to sell him into slavery instead,  
casting him into a deep pit  
until a wandering tribe on their way to Egypt bought him.

“At least we will never have to set eyes on him again,” they thought!

The brothers hid what they did by lying to Jacob.

They killed a sheep and soaked Joseph’s beautiful, distinctive robe  
with the animal’s blood, bringing proof to their father  
that Joseph apparently had been killed and eaten by a wild beast. Any  
of us can see that their acts of hate and deception could be counted as  
unforgivable.

However, unknowingly to his brothers, Joseph prospered in Egypt!

He became known to Pharaoh as a gifted interpreter of dreams,  
and his understanding of the dreams proved to be accurate.

Pharaoh took Joseph into his care and made him second in command in the kingdom, and he began a new life in peace and prosperity in the new land. Over the next 30 years, Joseph was increasingly trusted with the affairs of Pharaoh.

Eventually, Joseph had two dreams that revealed a 7-year famine that threatened to devastate the area, including the land of Canaan, where Joseph's family still lived.

Joseph organized the people of Egypt to plant huge amounts of grain, storing the surplus food in warehouses that would nourish the people during the approaching famine.

During his years in Egypt, Joseph grew in maturity as he remembered his own egotistical actions, the hate-filled actions of his brothers, and his current, blessed life.

He confronted his own pride that caused his brothers to hate him, evaluated his actions, and took responsibility for them; and thus, instead of plotting revenge on his brothers, Joseph decided that he would rather work toward healing the rift in his family.

From his death-pit of despair Joseph had risen with wisdom; and any revenge he felt was replaced with compassion. He began to work toward forgiveness and reconciliation.

The famine came to pass, and when Joseph's brothers come to Egypt to plead for food, they think Joseph is dead and do not recognize him. He makes a way for his brothers to surrender to him in trust, and receive his forgiveness.

Surrender is a painful, personal, process; but to surrender humbly to a higher good leads to a new life, love, and deep joy. In this case, to surrender will be for the good of a family that would otherwise be destroyed.

And we come to Genesis 45:  
First, Joseph reveals himself:

“I am Joseph,” he says to his astonished brothers.  
As the brothers find themselves in the presence of the living Joseph,  
they face their real guilt.  
They are so terrified, they cannot speak;  
and, expecting murderous retaliation, they wonder,  
“What will Joseph do to us?”

But Joseph draws them closer to him and assures them, “Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.”

Joseph assures them again, that God has acted for the good of all,  
for he has been able to thwart starvation on behalf of all the people in the  
land. Yet, how can the brothers trust that he is truly forgiving them?

When Joseph was 17, he had regarded his gift as something he had  
acquired himself, rather than attributing it to a gift from God,  
so he boasted of superiority over his brothers.

Yet, as Joseph matured, he looked back on his own life, and could see that God  
had woven his gifts, his mistakes, and his brothers’ retaliation together,  
to create something new, for the good of all.

They have hated him, sold him into slavery, and given him up for dead;  
but all that now becomes a thing of the past.

Spiritual growth is offered to his brothers as well;  
they have all been humbled by the truth of their own sin.

True reconciliation is demanding.

Joseph’s efforts begin with creating a safe space for the work to be done.

He draws his siblings near, to meet his brothers where they are;  
he proves willing to let go of the past and share a new perspective  
from God.

To his brothers’ surprise, Joseph tells them that his past misfortune at their hands  
has been reversed by a work of divine initiative.

God was behind it all, scripting everything; the brothers need not despair, or turn on each other in blame.

A new perspective allows them to reframe the past and paves a new way forward.

Joseph's powerful speech at first seems to relieve his brothers of their responsibility for past wrongdoings.

However, his intention is not to deny or trivialize their actions.

By stressing "It was not you, but God who sent me here," Joseph seems to say "It is all over now."

The brothers respond with relief and intimate conversation, and their alienation is finally reversed.

Healing the breach with his brothers requires Joseph to tear away all façades; he acknowledges the truth of the situation.

Joseph realizes that transformation will be possible for his family only if they find a way to encounter each other through personal and authentic honesty.

Gone is the, self-absorbed dreamer. God's work is now front and center in Joseph's perspective. Joseph embraces each brother with tears that prove to be a balm of healing and harmony, as he washes away their hatred, and their fear. Their desire to move toward grace and peace in the family is a model for us all.

If they had not been willing to reconcile, future generations would continue to be enemies, with prevailing hatred and revenge destroying the family rather than creating hope of peace among them.

God's purpose is to take our brokenness – our bad decisions and actions; our failure to love as he loves -- and use it for good in the end.

The fact that it has taken Joseph 30 years to reach the point of reuniting with his family helps us to realize that, when society shows its bondage to evil and ugliness, we do not always see the end result of God's amazing work for the good of all. But we can act in the freedom of love, grace, and mercy to our own neighbors and loved ones,

building relationships that are patterned after Christ's advice in our scripture passage from Luke, that by Grace, we are spiritually free to experience the blessing of having loved generously.

Jesus encourages us to let go and be free of our very real hurts that have been inflicted on us, because our health and well-being depend on it.

The process of forgiveness which Joseph employed with his brothers is a classic pattern that has been handed down to us as the epitome of gracious behavior, positive psychology, which manifests in our physical bodies:

Forgiveness buffers against poor health and psychological consequences, especially for the one who has been acted upon – the transgressed.

Failing to forgive harbors the habit of recurring thoughts of anger, vengeance, hate, and resentment that have negative consequences on the health of the person who was wronged, and will eventually bring on increased anxiety, depression, elevated blood pressure, vascular resistance, decreased immune response, and worse outcomes in coronary artery disease. In other words,

holding on to hate and resentment creates a lethal poison to our system.

*I have a trusted friend whose mother had refused to forgive anyone she believed had hurt or wronged her. She stubbornly believed that, if she forgave her transgressors, they would just hurt her again; and neither would she apologize for her own transgressions.*

*One day she became quite ill and could not breathe. She went to the doctor, who suspected pneumonia and hospitalized her; but when he read her tests and X-rays, he told her it was not pneumonia, yet her lungs were filled with a mysterious black matter, and she did not have long to live. She went home and began praying, and experienced an epiphany: that she was dying because the poison of hate and unforgiveness was filling her lungs.*

*She began praying for every transgressor that had come into her life,  
and after a few months, when new X-rays were taken,  
her lungs had cleared except for one spot.*

*When her doctor told her about the spot, she said,  
“Oh, yes, I still need to forgive So-and-so!”*

From this story we can see clearly that forgiveness is a practice we can learn.

We can choose to forgive, to let the past be forgotten –  
perhaps not completely – but remembered only as a temporary  
wound that has now been washed away –  
like water off a duck’s back.

When Jesus teaches

*“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,  
bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you,”  
“Do to others as you would have them do to you,” and  
“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful,”*

he is telling us there is a better way to deal with our memory of wrongful pain. He seems to say,

*It is an opportunity to do yourself a world of good.*

*It will also put you in shape to do some good toward the person who hurt you and for a lot of other people besides. I call it forgiving.  
You really ought to try it.*

This is the only productive way to live,  
and this is why Jesus teaches us consistently that  
in forgiving others we acknowledge the forgiveness that is granted to us daily,  
at any moment of need, to feel the release, the ultimate freedom,  
of God's grace. And in turn, we "let it go" toward our transgressors.

The alternative to forgiving – getting even – only makes the pain last longer  
and feel worse. Even if we cause our enemy the worst pain we can  
think of, we don't feel any better for it --  
A sip of sweet revenge, maybe, but with no lasting joy in it.

To forgive allows us the freedom to be the people we are meant to be.  
It suits us, the way making music suits a lyrical spirit.  
Birds ought to sing, and buds ought to blossom, and children ought to dance --  
just because it is in them to do it!  
Forgiving others suits us.

It matches **our** condition as imperfect beings,  
grateful for having been forgiven by others – and by God.

This is why people do good things.

If your heart is right, you will do what is right.

If you feel grateful for love given to you,  
you will be generous in giving love.

There will be a fit – a congruence – between what you **are,**  
and what you **feel,** and what you **do;**

and you will experience the liberating freedom of forgiveness.

Thanks be to God for his amazing grace, **that is ours** – and, **that is ours to share.**  
Amen.

