

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?"¹⁶ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died:¹⁷ 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

¹⁸ His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.²¹ So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:15-21)

What Do You Do Afterwards?

When he resigned this week, the mayor of Detroit said that he wished he could turn back the clock and undo some of the things he did and said over the last year. Most of us are never going to be on television talking about how the choices we've made have damaged things that we hold precious. But many of us have wished that we could turn back the clock and undo things that caused pain and sorrow and destroyed things we cared about. After that kind of incident, when we've hurt the people we love most and we've lost things that we can never get back, you still have to go on living. **What do you do afterwards?** That's what we want to focus on this morning. Our lesson for today gives us the last incident recorded from the lives of the founding fathers of Israel. It is rich in authentic human experience. And it is the word of God given for our learning.

I.

What do you do afterwards? How do you find peace? The key figure in today's story is Joseph. Not the husband of Virgin Mary. This Joseph lived almost two thousand years before Jesus was born. He was the eleventh son of Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons by four different women. Those twelve men had competed for their father's affection. Joseph was the favorite. One day Jacob sent Joseph out to check on how his brothers were taking care his sheep. The brothers let their hate get the better of them. They threw Joseph into a pit with plans to murder him. But a caravan of traders approached and Joseph's brothers figured that they could rid of him and make a little money on the side. So they sold him as a slave.

Joseph went against his will to Egypt. He lived there for twenty years. His brothers thought he was dead or worse. And he did get off to kind of a rough start. He wound up in jail for a couple of years. But God was with Joseph. Through a series of miracles, God raised Joseph from prisoner to prime minister of the most powerful country in the world. When a famine struck, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to buy food. Eventually, Joseph revealed himself to them and brought his father and the families of his brothers to Egypt to live in safety and prosperity while years of famine ravaged Egypt and her neighbors.

Our story today picks up when Jacob died. Joseph's brothers were afraid. They asked, **"What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?"** There was no constitution in Egypt that protected the rights of the accused. If Joseph had just been playing nice while his father was alive and now he wanted revenge, no one in Egypt was going to risk their lives for a bunch of foreigners. But their question betrays a deeper emotion: guilt. They had done a terrible wrong. It clearly haunted their consciences for decades. Now guilt and fear induced a near panic in these men.

So they sent Joseph a message saying that their father had asked Joseph to forgive them for all that they had done. Was this message real? Did Jacob really say this? The famous Lutheran commentators of the past – starting with Martin Luther himself – are nearly unanimous in saying that he did. But I can't help but feel like that's wishful thinking. As I read the chapter, it seems to me like a story they made up because they were desperate. Whichever opinion is true, they fell at their brother's feet and made this desperate request for forgiveness.

Luther says that this incident shows just how easy it is for sin to get its way in our hearts and how hard it is for us to get free of its guilt and its power. Luther is right on the money. When I meet with couples whose marriages are failing, there's always a laundry list of things that they've done and said. Somewhere in the conversation someone always says that they wish they could undo the past, but they can't. It's sad because they

stood before the altar of a church somewhere and they promised to love each other and be faithful to each other for as long as they both shall live. In almost every case, they meant it when they said it. But it's so easy for sin to get into our hearts and our lives. Even if they have been faithful sexually, hard heartedness and hard headedness have taken their toll and damaged or destroyed a gift that God gave them.

If you are guilty of words and actions that destroyed your marriage or ruined your relationship with your children or caused pain that someone else cannot forget, you may spend the rest of your life wishing you could go back and undo that pain. Wishing you could whisper in your own ear ten years ago or two days ago and talk yourself out of that sin. You may live in fear of what hurt is going to come next. How much more are you going to have to pay?

Joseph's brothers understood that hurt. And they longed for peace. When you and I long for that same peace, where will it come from? It comes from Jesus. And only from Jesus. Do you understand that? It's natural for us to look for that peace from friends and relatives and so often, those people tell us, "You shouldn't feel so bad. You did the best you could. You're a good person." But when you know that you're guilty, there is no peace in platitudes. When you fear that next hurt or pain that grows out of your own history, there is no promise of peace in those empty words.

But Jesus does give us peace, even when we're guilty, even when our sin haunts us and destroys the things we treasure in this life. You see, Jesus won forgiveness for us. Being guilty means that a person has committed the crime and deserves to be punished. When the mayor pled guilty, he was admitting he had done what he was accused of and as a result, he will be spending months in jail. When we feel guilty, we know in our hearts that we've done something wrong, something that God may very well punish us for. God's punishment is far worse than four months in prison. God's punishment is death and hell. Somewhere in our hearts, we know that and we fear that and that guilt tortures us.

Jesus knows that, too. So he came here to take our place. He came here to set us free from guilt and punishment. God didn't just look the other way and pretend like we didn't sin. God did something far more valuable. He sent his Son to be perfect in our place. He sent his Son to be punished for our sins, to stand where we deserve to stand, to feel God's justice raining down on his head. God the Father sent Jesus to the cross. God the Father made Jesus suffer hell itself there. God the Father required that Jesus give up his life there. Jesus did all that, not because he deserved it. But because we do.

Because Jesus has taken our place, God has forgiven us. God calls us his children. We may still suffer consequences of our sins here – if you cheat on your spouse, your marriage may very well end. But when we turn to God in repentance and trust in Jesus, God wipes the guilt away. God promises that we will live with him in heaven forever. God counts us as his own. That gives us comfort and hope even when we have to pick up the pieces of our lives here. Even when our own sinful stupidity has ruined the things we love here, in Christ God gives us relief and healing. It may take us years of going to Jesus before our sinful hearts trust him enough to be completely free from guilt and sorrow. But the only power that can give us peace is the power of the gospel, the power of Jesus living and dying and rising to tell us that all our sin is gone forever. That's how we find peace.

II.

Do you know how to give that peace to other people? There are lots of things we do when we want to comfort people. Someone might bring meals to a family that's going through a loss or a hospitalization. When I was in college and got dumped by a girl – who was vastly inferior to the girl I married, by the way – a friend of mine came every day and made me go running with him. That helped some. But I have to tell you, even as a pastor, I often wish that there was more that I could do or say. When I leave I often wonder if I made you feel any better. Disaster strikes our lives. All too often, we ourselves are the sources of that disaster. When that's true about someone you care about, **what do you do afterward? How do you give peace?**

Joseph and his brothers show us the answer. It begins with the confession Joseph's brothers made. They didn't make excuses. They didn't say, "If I hurt you, I'm sorry." We Americans do not know how to apologize. We know how to shift the blame onto someone else. We know how to make it seem like it wasn't completely my fault. That's not apologizing. An apology is not a courtroom hearing. You're not trying to win an argument or get the best deal you can. Joseph's brothers did much better. They confessed their sin and they asked Joseph to forgive them. It's that simple. You say, "I know I hurt you. I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

When someone confesses and asks for forgiveness, their peace is your hands. Joseph gives us an excellent example of forgiving. He didn't shrug off what his brothers did. He said, **"You intended to harm me."** It does no good to pretend that sin isn't sin. Any comfort that comes from telling a person "It's OK" is a false comfort because sooner or later, they're going to figure that they're not OK. They're sinners and they're guilty of real sin. Joseph acknowledged his brothers' sin and he forgave it.

Before he did, he said, **"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?"** God wants us to forgive each other. It's not optional. But it's only possible when we remember that we are not in the place of God. We don't get to decide how much a person deserves to suffer. We don't get to hold ourselves over the person who hurt us and demand that they crawl to us. We're sinners, just as much as that person who hurt us. To offer forgiveness and peace we need to acknowledge that we are sinners who need forgiveness and we need a humble faith that trusts that in Jesus Christ, God gave me that forgiveness. God treats me as his own beloved child. And God calls me to reflect his forgiving love by forgiving those who hurt me.

Joseph could offer peace to his brothers because he himself had found peace even before they asked for his forgiveness. He said, **"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."** People don't always ask for forgiveness, at least not right away. Joseph had more than twenty years to think about what his brothers had done. He realized that God had used their sin to preserve the lives of Joseph's own family and also the lives of millions of other people in Egypt and outside it.

Christian humility recognizes that God has a plan and sometimes, my role in that plan hurts. God is doing bigger things than I can possibly know. I need to trust him and let go of pride and bitterness in my own heart. We can do that because we know that God loved us enough to send his Son for us. When we remember Jesus sleeping in that manger and hanging on that tree, when we remember the angel standing in the empty tomb and announcing that Jesus has risen, we recognize his infinite love for us. That love will always do what is best for us, even if it allows other sinners to hurt us terribly.

When we can acknowledge our hurt and forgive for Jesus' sake, then we can give the fruits of forgiveness to those who need them. Those fruits help them to take know your forgiveness is real. Joseph promised to provide for his brothers and their children. He spoke kindly to them. The Hebrew literally says, "He spoke to their hearts." He offered them love they didn't deserve and forgiveness that they could never find, except in Christ and his followers. And that gospel comforted them. Forgiveness gives healing to the guilty heart. We acknowledge our brothers' sins are real. But we assure him that Jesus died even for those sins. We forgive them and love them, because we are forgiven, too.

Peace is one the greatest gifts we can get in this life. It's so important that the founders of our congregation named this church "Peace." Each of us has times in our lives when peace is hard to find. Peace comes to us through Jesus' love and forgiveness. God gives us that peace so that we can share it with others, by forgiving them and loving them. Share that peace. Amen.