

## “Growing into Forgiveness”

Genesis 45:3–11, 15

Luke 6:27–38

When something bad happens to someone we know, we have a hard time finding words of comfort, so may blurt out something like, “Everything happens for a reason ...”

We mean to encourage them to trust in God, but it doesn’t meet the hurting person where they are ... doesn’t acknowledge their pain ...

Yeah, bad things happen ... not because of God’s plan, but because of stupidity, malice or accident ...

“Everything happens for a reason ...” is well-meaning ... but blames God ... denies their present pain ... and short-circuits the process of coming to terms with what has happened ...

Healing needs to begin first ... acceptance comes later ... much later

Jesus commands forgiveness in today’s Gospel reading ... “do good to those who hate you” and “pray for those who abuse you.” “Offer the other cheek to the person who strikes you in the face. If someone takes something from you, don’t ask for them to return it.”

Theologian Phyllis Kersten says, “ ... this ... is ... a dangerous text and has often been misused in the past, especially by the church. It became a word preached to slaves and others in abusive relationships in order to keep them in their place. Jesus did not intend his words to be applied against the oppressed.”

Presbyterian pastor Jill Duffield adds: “Let’s be clear, Jesus never condones abuse. Jesus holds accountable those who persecute and injure others, and so should we. Jesus does not tell people to remain in dangerous, hurtful circumstances. Jesus insists his followers adhere to the standard of love, even for their enemies. Like Joseph, disciples of Jesus Christ seek the good, even for those who have sought to do them harm.”

The story of Joseph’s reconciliation with his brothers models real forgiveness. Joseph shows us that fast forgiveness isn’t real forgiveness ... that real forgiveness takes time ... that forgiveness is the fruit of a growth process ...

If we are to understand this process, we need to hear how Joseph came to forgive his brothers:

- The passage we read a few minutes ago is the climax of the story of Joseph, which runs eleven chapters ... from Genesis 37 through 47.
  - By the way, the story is a good read. It features a dysfunctional family ... sibling rivalry ... sex ... lots of twists and turns ... and a happy ending.

- The story inspired German writer Thomas Mann to weave the tale into *Joseph and His Brothers*, a set of three 300-page novels ... and moved Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice to create the Broadway hit “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.”
- Joseph was Jacob’s favorite son ... born later than his half-brothers ... doted on ... and a dreamer of outrageous dreams that did not sit well with them.
- His brothers conspired to kill him, but decided instead to leave him for dead, then sold him into slavery, and faked his death.
- Joseph went from slavery to relative privilege, then to prison after being falsely accused of rape. He languished there for years until he was remembered when the pharaoh needed help interpreting a dream.
- Joseph then enjoyed prominence as the second most powerful man in Egypt.
- Now, ten or more years later, when he is confronted by his family’s desperation, he lays his pride and hard feelings aside ... confronts the wrong (“You meant it for evil”), but interprets it as divine providence.

It is important to remember, that no one else could say to Joseph, “God has brought you here.” He had to grow to a level of maturity that enabled him to accept that insight. And it probably came to him only when he encountered his brothers.

Until Joseph discovered it for himself, he was unable to see good coming out of evil.

After reconciling with his brothers, he reunites with his father and full-blood brother, saves them all from starvation, and brings them to Goshen to live in security.

We cannot tell someone who has suffered a great evil at the hands of others that God is bringing good out of the tragedy.

If it is going to happen at all, hurting people must have a place where they can discover for themselves that God has somehow created something new out of their suffering, that out of their survival God’s grace can even provide food to save someone else from famine.

We the church are here to welcome hurting people into a safe space where they can begin to heal.

The church nurtures healing that enables forgiveness ...

- We nurture healing when in worship we confess our sins and hear words of pardon.
- We nurture healing when we share the peace of Christ after hearing the words of forgiveness.

- And we nurture healing when share the meal that Christ sets for us.

In Joseph we see a foreshadowing of Jesus our brother, who says, “Come closer to me.

- “You needn’t be paralyzed by your fear or tortured by your guilt any longer.
- “For I was sent by God to give you life, and to be the bread of life for you.
- “To lend you all the grace I have, so that you can enter a new future, where once and for all, keeping score is no more.”

My prayer this morning is that Heritage Church is imitating Jesus and becoming a safe space where we all can discover the good that God can bring out of the hurtful things that have happened to us ... and grow into forgiveness that Joseph models.