



Chapter 4 Forgiving

Joseph Reveals His Identity (Genesis 45:1-15 CEB)

Joseph could no longer control himself in front of all his attendants, so he declared, "Everyone, leave now!" So no one stayed with him when he revealed his identity to his brothers. He wept so loudly that the Egyptians and Pharaoh's household heard him. Joseph said to his brothers, "I'm Joseph! Is my father really still alive?" His brothers couldn't respond because they were terrified before him.

Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me," and they moved closer. He said, "I'm your brother Joseph! The one you sold to Egypt. Now, don't be upset and don't be angry with yourselves that you sold me here. Actually, God sent me before you to save lives. We've already had two years of famine in the land, and there are five years left without planting or harvesting. God sent me before you to make sure you'd survive and to rescue your lives in this amazing way. You didn't send me here; it was God who made me a father to Pharaoh, master of his entire household, and ruler of the whole land of Egypt.

"Hurry! Go back to your father. Tell him this is what your son Joseph says: 'God has made me master of all of Egypt. Come down to me. Don't delay. You may live in the land of Goshen, so you will be near me, your children, your grandchildren, your flocks, your herds, and everyone with you. I will support you there, so you, your household, and everyone with you won't starve, since the famine will still last five years.' You and my brother Benjamin

have seen with your own eyes that I'm speaking to you. Tell my father about my power in Egypt and about everything you've seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." He threw his arms around his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his shoulder. He kissed all of his brothers and wept, embracing them. After that, his brothers were finally able to talk to him.

I am going to begin this chapter with this caveat: Forgiveness is hard. I have avoided writing this chapter because I know how hard it is. Our human self-preservation instincts are hardwired into our brains! Forgiving is counter to our survival instincts, and yet our survival requires the ability to be in community. Being in community requires the ability to forgive. My husband always says, "Where two or more are gathered, there will be conflict." How we choose to navigate conflict is an extremely important skill, and the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis has a lot to teach us about forgiveness and reconciliation.

The story of Joseph and his brothers from the Book of Genesis has always fascinated me. It begins in Genesis 37. Jacob has grown older and has a family that includes four wives, one daughter, and twelve sons. Jacob and his favorite wife, Rachel, have two of these children together: Joseph and Benjamin. These two children are treated with favoritism because, it seems, Jacob has forgotten what he learned from his own experience of parental favoritism and the destruction it can have on siblings (Genesis 25:19–28:21).

Because Joseph is Jacob's favorite, Joseph is given a long-sleeved dress. This dress, tradition calls it a coat or robe, is not what one wears to tend flocks of sheep. The sleeves and the long tunic get in the way! While Joseph is allowed to do as he pleases during the day, the rest of Jacob's sons (Benjamin either hasn't been born yet or is a baby; the scholars do not have consensus on this point) are expected to care for Jacob's flocks.

Adding fuel to the jealous fire, Joseph has two dreams that he interprets for his family to mean that all of them will someday bow down to him. Even Jacob gets upset by this! So, Joseph's brothers decide to kill him. Reuben, the oldest brother, talks them out of murder and plans to rescue Joseph after the brothers have beaten him and thrown him in a cistern (a very large underground cave that rainwater was stored in). Reuben goes somewhere and, while he is gone, the brothers sell Joseph into slavery.

Talk about traumatic!

After Joseph is purchased by an Egyptian, he is forced to work in a home where he is sexually harassed, has his clothing removed from his body without his consent, and is sent to prison for a crime he didn't commit.

Talk about some more trauma!

During all of this, Joseph continues to believe God is with him. Despite the trauma, he trusts that God will weave his story back together—that these events won't have the final say and something good will be made from it.

Eventually, Joseph works his way to second-in-command of the Egyptians. Only Pharaoh has more power. Joseph helps the Egyptians plan for a famine, instructing them to store away surplus grain for seven years so there is enough for the following seven years. And when the famine came, the Egyptians had food while other communities did not. This is when the twelve brothers are brought back together.

Joseph's brothers didn't recognize him. They have come to Egypt with the hopes of buying some grain, not intending to find their brother Joseph. But Joseph recognizes them. I have wondered how he knew it was them. Was it because he was triggered by the memory of their abuse? Was it because he missed them and had spent decades wondering how his family was? Whatever it was, he decides he can't trust them yet. He devises a plan to test their growth. It's a bit manipulative—he gets them to bring Benjamin to Egypt the next time the brothers come and then frames Benjamin

for stealing a silver cup. When the brothers try to take Benjamin's punishment, Joseph is moved to tears and he reveals who he is: the brother they sold into slavery. He hugs them all. I imagine they are all crying by the end because Joseph tells them that God has used Joseph's pain for good. God saves the tribe of Israel through Joseph because Joseph is able to forgive his brothers. Not only does he forgive them, he invites them to move to Egypt with him. They reconcile!

My husband, Michael McRay, has literally written a book about forgiveness. He spent time as a volunteer chaplain at Riverbend Maximum Security Prison in Nashville, Tennessee, and learned a lot about forgiveness from the people incarcerated there. While he was at Trinity College Dublin getting his M.Phil. in Conflict Resolution, the things he learned from his time with the men on the inside kept coming up, so he wrote his thesis about what can be learned about forgiveness from those locked away in our prison. It got turned into *Where the River Bends: Considering Forgiveness in the Lives of Prisoners*.

In the first chapter, Michael writes about the five strands of forgiveness: "forgiveness as release, forgiveness as transcendence, forgiveness as goodwill, forgiveness as absolution, and forgiveness as reinterpretation."¹

Forgiveness As Release

When I was 25, I moved to Nashville, Tennessee, from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. It was a big decision, but I felt God was calling me to this new place and this new role in The UMC. I was married at the time, and my now ex-husband was supposed to get our house ready to sell and then come out to Tennessee. This never happened. Lots of trauma ensued instead, and we got divorced.

I was hurt, confused, alone, and angry. There were times when all I wanted to do was get in my car and drive ten hours just to throw eggs at my ex-husband's car. I wanted to find some way to make him feel the pain I was feeling. I wanted to get revenge.

¹ (McRay 2016) page 17

Anger is an important emotion and tells us when our boundaries have been crossed. If we don't get angry when someone causes us harm, we need to examine why. Anger is normal, and when we don't use it as a powerful fuel to get revenge, it can help keep us safe.

I like the way Michael frames this first strand of forgiveness as release. He doesn't say that no one should feel angry or like getting revenge. Instead, he says that forgiveness as release is "releasing claims for revenge."² There is some boundary-crossing that has caused harm, and our human need for safety is normal. But instead of holding on to the pain, we release ourselves from it. This strand of forgiveness is more about the forgiver than the forgiven.

Joseph could have sought revenge on his brothers for the harm they caused—he almost does—but he ends up releasing them **all** from any additional harm. I am sure Joseph had to have felt hurt, confused, alone, and angry when his brothers sold him into slavery. But instead of letting the need for revenge, that consuming fire, take control of his life, he released himself from it. And in releasing himself, he released all of his brothers too.

Forgiveness As Transcendence

Michael defines forgiveness as transcendence as a victim's ability to transcend real feelings of hatred.³ After you have released yourself from the need for revenge, you can find space to let go of the hatred you harbor for someone who has crossed your boundaries. Michael writes, "Thus, one can realize forgiveness as transcendence by coming to embrace the weakness within oneself, acknowledging the strengths in the other, and thereby coming to see his or her humanity."⁴

2 (McRay 2016) page 19

3 (McRay 2016) page 27

4 (McRay 2016) page 30

After I divorced, it took me about a year to let go of the hatred I harbored for my ex-husband. I no longer wanted to egg his car, but he had become the target for all of my troubles. I felt lonely in a new city—well, that was his fault. I didn't know how to set up my Wi-Fi router—well, he never taught me how to do that. I got into a car wreck going to therapy—well, I never would have needed to go to therapy if it weren't for him. Everything was his fault.

But clinging on to that sort of hate is exhausting, and it wasn't hurting anyone but me. I tried to see all of this from his perspective. *What happened to him that would have led him to perpetrate this level of harm on someone he claimed to love?* I began seeing him as a human instead of a villain. I could see there were ways I hurt him. I began to transcend my feelings of hatred.

I wonder what it took for Joseph to transcend his feelings of hatred for his brothers. Did he wonder if his father's favoritism had hurt his brothers? Did he think that maybe his boasting was like pushing a bruise? How was Joseph able to see the humanness in each of his siblings and in himself? We don't really know. But we do see Joseph continually rely on God's presence. No matter how bad Joseph's situation got, he trusted God was with him. Joseph did his best to transcend by trusting that God would somehow use his pain for good.

Forgiveness As Goodwill

The next three strands require that one or both of the first two strands have happened. Forgiveness as goodwill, Michael says, "*moves from negative through neutral toward positive emotions.*"⁵ A person who has been trespassed against let's go of vengeance or hatred and begins to wish well for the one who has trespassed against them.⁶

I didn't want my ex-husband to suffer for the pain he caused me. But even a few years post-divorce, I didn't really want things to be going well for him. Like Eleanor Shellstrop in *The Good Place*, I wanted there to be a medium place for him. I couldn't really bear to hear that he was thriving; I just didn't want him being tortured.

⁵ (McRay 2016) page 33

⁶ (McRay 2016) page 33

Permission is granted to duplicate this page for local church use only. © 2021 Cokesbury.

But somewhere along the way, I didn't feel that way. There wasn't some magical moment; he just stopped occupying space in my mind. Enough time had passed and I had moved on, so I sort of shrugged and hoped he was doing better than he was when I saw him last.

Joseph's brothers were his family. He got married without them present. He had children that he didn't think would ever meet his family. He probably wondered if he had niblings (nieces or nephews). We know he wondered about his little brother, Benjamin, and his father, Jacob. Were they alive? Were they doing okay? better than okay? I imagine he hoped so.

Forgiveness As Absolution

The last two strands require both the wronged and the wrongdoer to participate in the acts of forgiveness. The first three do not require the wrongdoer to acknowledge or apologize for the harm.⁷ Forgiveness as absolution "erases any relevance of the wrongdoing within the context of an *ongoing relationship* between the forgiver and the forgiven."⁸

My first marriage ended and so did any relationship between the two of us. We didn't have any children together, so we didn't have to figure out how to navigate co-parenting. We didn't even live in the same state. But I know a lot of folks who have learned how to reconcile relationships even after great harms. It's a practice, and sometimes requires going through the first three strands multiple times.

I love Michael, and we have a truly wonderful marriage. We also can drive each other nuts. I can be pretty "sharp" (that's how he describes it) when I have asked/demanded help with something. It's really hard for me to ask for help, and I overcompensate my shame around needing help by hiding behind anger. That's not his fault! I am grateful he extends "forgiveness as absolution," and we are able to move forward after I have admitted my wrongdoing and apologized.

⁷ (McRay 2016) page 34

⁸ (McRay 2016) page 35

Sometimes this step takes less than a minute. In the story of Joseph and his brothers, Joseph has a bit of time to think through a plan for testing the brothers (and revenge) by framing Benjamin. I imagine he had worked through the first three strands, and here is the moment—will his brothers show remorse? Will they protect this son who is now his father’s favorite?

All the brothers are ready to go to jail in Benjamin’s place. In Genesis 44, Judah pleads with Joseph. Judah tells Joseph that he promised to bring Benjamin back because Jacob cannot bear the loss of another son. Benjamin was born in Jacob’s old age, and if he loses Benjamin like he lost Joseph, Jacob will surely die. Judah begs to go to jail in Benjamin’s place.

This is where our Scripture passage begins. Joseph is moved by Judah’s pleading. Joseph can see his brothers have changed. He wants to be in relationship with them again. Joseph reveals who he is to his brothers.

Forgiveness As Reinterpretation

Michael suggests that the natural consequence of *forgiveness as absolution is forgiveness as reinterpretation*. “As one decides to let the wrongdoing no longer dictate the nature of the relationship, the decision becomes less an intentional choice and more a natural reality.”⁹

Almost immediately after Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, he tells them not to feel bad for selling him into slavery because God sent Joseph to Egypt to save the whole family.

Now if that isn’t reinterpreting his trauma, I don’t know what it is.

The brothers have been absolved from their harm to Joseph, and now their whole story has been reinterpreted as redemption narrative. That is the power of forgiveness.

⁹ (McRay 2016) page 44

Forgiving: allowing room for error or weakness

I defined forgiving as allowing room for error or weakness. Forgiveness can be a really complicated subject, and there are so many books about it. But it can simply be explained to our children as this:

We are all humans, and we are going to hurt others. Sometimes it will be on purpose. Sometimes it will be on accident. But we are going to hurt someone else one day. And we are going to be hurt. Our bodies might get hurt. Our feelings might get hurt. We will have to decide if we feel like we can trust the people who hurt us. When we hurt others, they will have to decide if they can trust us. When we forgive someone, we make space for people to learn and grow and do better the next time. When we are forgiven, we are given a gift to learn and grow and do better the next time. Forgiveness helps us stay connected. Forgiveness is a way to show ourselves and others compassion and love. Forgiveness is a gift.

One of the ways we model this for our children is by extending this gift to them and asking them for this gift when we mess up with them. We are all humans. And no matter how much we try to do right by others, do right by our children, we will cross boundaries. We will accidentally hurt each other. We will get irritated with each other. We will make impulse choices that don't connect to our values. When it happens, talk about it with your children. Let them see you and your partner offer forgiveness to each other. Tell your children you are sorry when you do something you wish you hadn't with them.

One of the paradoxes of life is this: The things that seem the weakest, like admitting you don't know or you are heartbroken or you are wrong, are actually the strongest. When you make space for error and weakness, you are actually making space for resilience and strength. Let the gift of forgiveness make space for you, your children, your partner, your family, and your friends. Be safe, strong, and free from the depleting self-protection that keeps us isolated and alone. Accept the forgiveness our God extends so freely and share it.