

Sermon Preached by the Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
August 20, 2017 Pentecost 11/Proper 13/Year A
Texts – Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

I've been eagerly anticipating this morning's passage from Genesis to come around again in the lectionary cycle. It is among the most powerful stories in all of scripture for me. Frankly, I can barely hold back tears when I hear it – tears of joy, of gratitude, of awe. It is a story contained in what we Christians call the "Old Testament." But in it appears one of the most moving stories of the Good News, of the Gospel. The story gives the lie to the very common notion that the Old Testament tells the story of the God of judgment, while the New Testament tells the story of the God of grace. In fact, judgment, grace, and love together form a braid that runs throughout scripture.

We're back to Jacob and his clan again. Last week we heard the beginning of the story of Jacob's sons. Joseph, of the "amazing technicolor dream-coat" fame, was clearly a favorite of his father. And his brothers despised him for it. By now I'm sure you've picked up on this common theme in scripture, the theme of sibling rivalry born in jealousy, and the extent brothers and sisters sometimes go to in order to do one another in. Cain and Abel. Jacob and Esau. And now this. The brothers set out to kill Joseph and are stopped only when one brother, Reuben, steps in and has him merely thrown into a pit, only to be sold to traders who bring him down to Egypt. The brothers think they've rid themselves of their bratty brother for good, and without even getting blood on their hands.

Many years pass. And while Joseph is no longer front and center in their lives, the memory of the brothers' dastardly act lingers, needling their conscience, for their life ever since has been rooted in a lie and plagued with nagging guilt. They do what people so often do. They justify their act to themselves in all sorts of ways. He deserved what he had coming to him. At least we didn't kill him. He needed to be taught a lesson. But every so often, late at night after their father has gone to sleep, they wonder aloud to each other: "What do you think ever became of Joseph?"

Well, it turns out, Joseph, the involuntary immigrant, has done quite well for himself. He's managed over the years to work himself up out slavery through his skill in interpreting Pharaoh's dreams. Pharaoh is so impressed and taken with Joseph that he promotes him through the ranks and gives him great power and authority in the Kingdom. The brothers have no way of knowing this, of course. They just know that Joseph is gone. And Jacob carries his grief into his old age.

More years pass. The brothers are older and wiser, and their father, Jacob, is growing feeble. Famine plagues the land. The family is getting desperate. They hear that Egypt had stockpiled lots of grain during the good years, so Jacob sends his sons down to the neighboring land to inquire whether they have any food to spare. When they arrive, they are directed to the one responsible for making such decisions. It is a man wearing colorful, royal garments, a man who looks eerily familiar. The man, of course, is Joseph. He recognizes this hungry clan standing before him as his brothers, but they don't recognize him. And Joseph does not let on, despite the fact that his heart aches for them, for his father, and for his youngest brother, Benjamin.

After a series of torturous journeys home and back, the brothers once again are standing before Joseph, who still has not told them who he is. But Joseph's longing for those whom he loves finally overtakes him. He sends all the attendants out of the room, and begins to wail so loudly that everyone throughout the court can hear his sobs. Finally, through his tears, he cries out, "I am Joseph, your brother. Is my father still alive?"

The brothers go ashen. Uh Oh. It's payback time, they think. We're doomed. But echoing Jesus from last week, who beckons Peter to walk toward him, Joseph says to his brothers, "Come closer to me. I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Do not be distressed (*do not fear*), do not be angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life." I am here for you.

Now, it takes a while for the brothers to take this all in. First, that their younger brother not only is still alive, but also has been so successful. Second, that they haven't recognized him until now. But mostly they are stunned that Joseph has no interest in retribution, no interest in acting out of anger. Joseph simply wants to be with them and their father. He wants to give them what they need: food, shelter, and refuge from the famine. "Come and live near me, you and your children and your children's children. I will provide for you." And at that, Joseph and Benjamin embrace in tears. Joseph kisses all his brothers – he passes the sign of peace. And they talk with one another. They sure have a lot of catching up to do.

The brothers encounter in Joseph something totally unexpected, something wholly other, something impossible. They encounter immediate and complete forgiveness. They receive grace. They hear the Good News. They see the face of God.

Some of you know that I've studied a fair amount of philosophy. Part of that included a study of the classic proofs of God's existence. None of them ever convinced me. But today's story holds what all those intellectual musings can never touch. If you've ever had someone who has something against you say to you, "Come closer, I'm here for you"; if you've ever embraced someone you never in your wildest dreams thought would ever speak to you again; if you've ever been forgiven; if you've ever had your offer of forgiveness received with open arms – then you've experienced the heart of the Good News. You've experienced grace. You've experienced God. Forgiveness is the pearl of great price. It is something so rare among us human beings that when it happens, it stuns us, like it stunned Joseph's brothers. How can it be? Indeed. Forgiveness is the impossible possibility of God's tender touch.

Forgiveness is what the world needs. It's what members of this congregation need. It's what each of us needs. But there are so many barriers to it. Pride. Self-righteousness. Resentment. The refusal to let go of being right. The list goes on and on. I know them all, first hand. The miraculous thing about forgiveness, though, is that it frees not only the one who is forgiven, but also the one who is forgiving. It's hard enough to imagine how Joseph's brothers must feel. Imagine how Joseph feels not to be burdened with the need to hurt his brothers in return for what they did to him. He's free of heart-crushing resentment. He's free to live close to his family. He's free to give to them. He's free to love them. Forgiveness is the antidote to so much of the disease that infects human hearts.

If you've been hurt by what another has said or done, look at Joseph. If you have hurt someone by what you have said or done, look at Joseph. Walk toward your brother or sister. Walk tentatively and slowly if you need to. But walk toward them. Ask for forgiveness. Offer forgiveness. Hold out your hands. Discover the impossible possibility. This is the gift God holds out to each of us here, today.