



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“FORGIVEN”

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 133; Genesis 45:1-15

*This sermon was preached by Rev. Tracey W. Daniel on Sunday, August 16, 2020
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Genesis 45:1-15

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, ‘Send everyone away from me.’ So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?’ But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come closer to me.’ And they came closer. He said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, “Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.” And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.’ Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Leader: The Word of God, for the people of God.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

O Lord, your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Give us grace to rejoice your word for us today in faith and love. Give us strength to follow the path you place before us. Amen.

When a crisis hits, we are reminded about what really matters. Over the past five months, all of us have been living in a time of crisis, and it's during times like these that our priorities are clarified. In an article in the Presbyterian Outlook last April, Jill Duffield, the editor, writes about how our lives feel smaller and less. In the editor's letter she says this, “As our calendars once were packed, now look strangely blank and the regular rhythm of our lives have changed. What has been unmasked is what really matters. Here's the list that Duffield offers of what really matters; see if you agree:

- Relationships ensuring that everyone has food shelter and healthcare
- Tending to those who long known what it means to be isolated and alone
- Noticing beauty and practicing courageous kindness
- Giving thanks for every new day
- Radical compassion
- Confessing our failings and saying we're sorry and extending forgiveness

Of course, this list was written just at the U.S. was beginning our situation dealing with the Covid pandemic. I'm curious to think about what it is that you have noticed is really important in your life. What really has mattered during this time of crisis? What continues to matter during this time of crisis?

In the gospel passage that we read today, Joseph and his family are living in a time of great crisis. There's a famine and people are hungry. This story of Joseph and his brothers started long before our scripture lesson today. You may remember the story of Joseph as the boy who wore the coat of many colors. Joseph was favored by his father, you see, his father Jacob. Jacob gave Joseph a very special coat, a coat with many, many colors and it was much fancier than the coat the other brothers had.

Joseph was a dreamer. He dreamed about how one day his brothers and his father would all bow down to him. He bragged about his dreams. You can imagine how well that went over. Joseph's older brothers literally despised him so much so that they wanted to get rid of him for good, and they came up with a plan, a plan to kill him. Judah, one of the brothers, thought of a better idea. He said, "Don't kill him; let's sell him into slavery, and we can make some money. We'll tell our father that a wild animal has killed him." And that's what they did.

Many, many years have gone by since this happened when we get to the point in today's lesson. During these years, the brothers remained in Canaan, and Joseph lived in Egypt. Joseph did not have an easy go of it in Egypt, not by any stretch of the imagination. First, he served as a slave. He was falsely accused of inappropriate behavior, and he was thrown into prison. However, Joseph had a special gift. Remember he liked to interpret dreams.

When the Pharaoh had some very strange dreams, and so somebody remembered that Joseph had a talent for interpreting those, and they sent for Joseph. Joseph came to Pharaoh and he interpreted his dreams, and because of that, the Pharaoh was so relieved and so grateful, that Joseph began to rise in power. And so, by the time Joseph's brothers came to Egypt, during this famine, Joseph was the guy, the person that they had to go to in order to get the grain. Only the Pharaoh, you see, had anticipated this famine coming because of the interpretation that Joseph had made about his dreams, and so the Pharaoh had stored up lots and lots of grain, and people all over everywhere came to get this grain. The family of Joseph was living in this time of crisis, and when life is reduced to a time of crisis, whether it be a famine, a pandemic or any other loss, it really makes what's important stand out. Crisis can be a catalyst for growth.

In the story today, the crisis of the famine made forgiveness and reconciliation with Joseph and his family become a priority. Saying we're sorry and offering our forgiveness is one of those

things that really matters. Each week when we in worship together, we have the opportunity to come together and confess our sins and also, we received the good news that we have already been forgiven. This is an opportunity for us to experience the fresh air of Christ moving through our lives, cleansing us and restoring us, and helping us know that we have a second chance, and it's because God forgives us that we're able to forgive other people.

In many churches, the passing of the peace immediately follows this time of confession. These two acts are connected because when we receive the peace of Christ, we can offer that same peace to others, and when we're passing the peace of Christ, that's literally what we're doing. We're saying, "I know Christ has forgiven me, and because I'm reconciled to Christ, I can be reconciled to you." You know, some people refuse to forgive, though, I wonder if you've ever met any of those, or maybe you've been one of those. A person who refuses to forgive is the person who suffers the pain and hurt. Research has actually shown that a person who holds onto anger can become physically ill.

One of the saddest things that I have the opportunity to observe from time to time as a pastor, is when families are broken because somebody refuses to forgive somebody else. There have been times when I have been a part of funerals or weddings when the tension is so thick you can cut it with a knife, and when you get to the root of it, it's about someone holding a grudge against someone else. And sadly, sometimes people can't even remember how it all started; it just continues to fester through the years, and somebody refuses to let go.

In one of the daily inspirational emails that I receive by Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and a popular speaker and writer, he shares a story about his very own family and forgiveness. He says that his mother on her deathbed was telling him, "I feel ill-at-ease. I feel there's some mesh that's keeping me from being at peace." That's how she described it...some mesh. And he said he went to her bedside, Richard Rohr did, and he said, "Mom, I love you. I'll miss you. You've been wonderful to me." And she said, "I want to hear that from your father." The father was in the room hearing this. And they had been married for over 54 years, and the father comes over and he says to his wife, "I'm going to miss you." And she went on, "I don't believe it." And he said, "No, I really am going to miss you." And he said, "And I ask you to forgive me for anything I've done over these 54 years that may have caused you pain, and I forgive you for anything you've done to me as well." And Richard Rohr said, "Oh Mom, isn't that beautiful? Isn't that such a wonderful, wonderful thing dad has done. And now, don't you want to tell him the same thing?" She got really silent. She clammed up. She said, "I can't." And Richard Rohr said, "Mom, you're going to meet your Maker. Don't you want to have everything settled here with your affairs?" He said, "I'm going to pray with you," and so he prays with her. He said he put his hand actually on her heart, and asked God to soften her heart, and to help her to be able to forgive. And after he had done that, sometime later she said, "You know, I've been a stubborn woman all my life, and it's really been hard for me to let go of grudges, but I want to tell your dad I forgive him. And so the dad comes, and she forgives him, and Richard Rohr then says, "Now, Mom, how about the other part, where you ask him to forgive you?" And eventually she comes around and she asked for his forgiveness as well. Richard Rohr goes to tell that his mother says to him in the next few days, "You know, that mesh, that uncomfortableness that I had, it's gone. I feel at peace now. Thank you for helping me come to this place and this time." She said, "I needed to ask for

forgiveness.” She also said, “Please tell your sisters and tell everybody that they should make this act of forgiveness happen way before they're on their deathbed.”

And so Joseph, today in his narratives, did not wait till he was on his deathbed to reconcile with his brothers. And although the story doesn't tell us very much about the actual forgiveness, we don't hear Joseph saying, “I forgive you,” or the brothers begging for forgiveness. We can see through Joseph's actions that he forgives his brothers. There are a couple of things that I noticed through these actions that Joseph did that I think might be worth us considering. The first thing I noticed about Joseph and his act of forgiveness was that he did not rehearse his hurts. He didn't nurse his grudges. He was able to be with them, and not recount, “but you did this and this and this and this.”

I once heard a psychologist share this illustration about a person who talks about their troubles too much. Now as a pastor, and a person who really thinks Stephen Ministry is great, I believe everybody should have someone to talk to, and I believe there are times when we need to share our feelings, and what's on our heart. But I believe there comes a time when we have to let go of those hurts, and move on with our living. Well, this psychologist described it this way: Think of a person rehearsing their hurts as a person stringing beads on a necklace. And if they're wearing that necklace, as you add each bead, the necklace either gets heavier and pulls you down, or the necklace gets tighter and it chokes you. I think that's a good image for us to think about.

And so Joseph, he did not recount the hurt that his brothers had done to him, and it was mighty. And I can imagine all of us have been hurt at some time or another. I encourage us to think about today where we might be holding grudges, and what we might need to let go of.

The second thing that I noticed about Joseph and the way he dealt with his brothers was he met with them in private. Joseph asked all the Egyptians that were around to please give them some time, and he speaks directly to those who hurt him. Sometimes we're tempted to see how many people we can get on our side, and we do more talking about people than two people, and this can get us into trouble. I think we have an example in Joseph going directly to his brothers and having a conversation.

The third thing that I noticed is that Joseph chooses to focus not on what the brothers had in mind, but on how God used what happened to make Joseph's life meaningful and helpful to his family. He told them, “You know, you meant it for harm, but God used it for good.” You meant it for harm, but God used it for good. So, he put his focus on what it was that God was doing in his life.

Well, I wonder about us today. Not one of us really has a perfect life, and I suspect that we have all experienced hurts, and we've all hurt others. I'm sure we've all suffered in our own particular ways. We're all living in a time of crisis, and during this time of crisis, we have an opportunity to focus on what really matters. Is there someone we need to forgive? Is it time for us to stop rehearsing the things that have hurt us? Are there grudges we need to let go of? Can we put our minds to focusing on what God is doing in the midst of us? Can we look for God? Can we live our lives in ways that share God's love and forgiveness?

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.