

GRACE FORGIVES

a sermon based on Genesis 45:1-15

Luke 6:27-38

by the Rev. Dr. Stephen R. Hanning

First Congregational United Church of Christ

2624 Rockefeller, Everett, WA 98201

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What is grace? To some, grace is what is said before meals. I have a story.

An atheist is hiking in the forest when he stumbles onto a huge grizzly bear. The atheist shrieks in horror, turns around and runs back in the direction from which he came with the bear in hot pursuit. The atheist trips on a tree root and falls and breaks his leg. He thinks to himself, "Now what would a Christian do in a situation like this?" He decides that it's time to become a believer. So, he prays at the top of his voice, "O Lord, I have denied that you exist all this time but now I confess that You do exist. I only ask that just as you have converted me into a Christian, that you do the same to this bear that is fast closing in on me." At which point, the bear falls on his knees, folds his front paws, and says, "Dear Lord, for these tender mercies which I am about to receive, I give thanks. Amen."

Giving thanks and asking God to bless our food is called grace because, like everything else, our food is a gift of God's grace. But, we know that grace is more than a prayer before meals.

Theologian and author Frederick Buechner says that "Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth."

In today's Scripture reading from Genesis, we witnessed the gift of grace. Can you imagine what it was like when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers? It sends a chill up and down my spine to think of it. But, we tuned in at the end of the story. Let's go back to Canaan where our story begins.

Joseph was his father Jacob's favorite son which made his brothers extremely

jealous of him, especially when his father had a seamless, long-sleeved coat of many colors woven for him. What made this coat so special was that it was not made by piecing together strips of different colors. It was made all in one piece. One day, Joseph told his brothers of a dream in which he and his brothers were working in the field and suddenly his sheaf of wheat stood up and his brothers' sheaves of wheat bowed down to his. The idea that they would bow down to him drove his brothers crazy.

Then, one day Jacob sent Joseph out to see how his brothers were doing and they hatched a plot to get rid of him once and for all. They grabbed him and took off his coat, his many-colored coat, and threw him into a pit. Some time later, a caravan came by and they sold him to an Ishmaelite merchant as a slave. Then they slaughtered a goat and soaked Joseph's coat in the goat's blood and showed it to their father Jacob, saying, "This coat is all that is left of him." And Jacob was certain that Joseph had been attacked and devoured by wild animals and he was deeply grieved to think that his son was dead.

The scene shifts to Egypt where the merchant had sold Joseph to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's elite palace guard. And Joseph proved to be so capable that Potiphar made him overseer of his entire household. It so happened that Potiphar's wife was very much attracted to Joseph, so much so that one day she took hold of him and tried to seduce him. The only way he could escape her embrace was to shed his coat and run away. She accused him of trying to rape her and showed Joseph's coat to Potiphar who was so enraged he had Joseph thrown into prison. However, Joseph impressed the chief jailer so much that he was put in charge of all the other prisoners. Some time later, Joseph encountered two prisoners who were deeply troubled by their dreams which no one could interpret. Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell your dreams to me." They told their dreams to Joseph and he said that Pharaoh would pardon one man but execute the other.

And Joseph's interpretations proved to be true but the one whose life was spared forgot about Joseph until two years later when Pharaoh had two dreams which his court magicians and wise men could not interpret. Then, the man, whose life was spared, remembered Joseph and he told Pharaoh that there was a Hebrew in Pharaoh's prison whose God enabled him to correctly interpret his and another man's dreams. So Pharaoh sent for Joseph and Joseph told him that his dream of seven fat cows and seven full ears of corn followed by seven starving cows and

seven thin ears of corn was a sign from God that first there would be seven years of abundance followed by seven years of drought and famine.

Pharaoh was so impressed with Joseph's interpretation that he said, "Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house....and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you." and he appointed Joseph overseer over all of Egypt.

Just as Joseph had predicted, there were seven years of plenty after which seven years of drought and famine set in, not only in Egypt, but in all the neighboring countries as well, including Canaan where Joseph's family dwelled. The day came when Jacob and his family had run out of food and he sent ten of his eleven sons to Egypt where, it was reported, food was available to buy. Jacob had kept his youngest, and now favorite son Benjamin with him. The ten brothers arrived at the palace gates and Joseph's steward ushered them in. When he saw his brothers, he instantly recognized them but did not let on. Instead, he rudely inquired about their family. They said that there were 12 sons, one of whom was dead and the other, the youngest, was at home with his parents. He accused them of being spies but when they protested, he said that the only way they would get any food was if they brought their youngest brother Benjamin back with them.

So, they returned to Canaan with some food and then came back to Egypt with Benjamin. Joseph wanted to make them leave Benjamin with him while they returned to Canaan to bring their parents back to Egypt but Judah, the spokesman for the brothers, protested that their father would die of a broken heart if they were to return without Benjamin.

And this is where today's passage picks up. "Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, 'Send everyone away from me'" (meaning his Egyptian servants). 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.' 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 that you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.'"

He told them that they and their families and their father and mothers would come to live with him in Egypt where they would be well provided for. “Then ,” we are told, “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.”**Now that’s grace!!!**

After all he had suffered as a result of their treachery, he now was in a position to take revenge on them and, instead, he forgives them, saying, “do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.””

The grace that forgives does not come easily to most of us. It seems more to our nature to want revenge, to get even. That’s why Joseph’s story sends chills up and down my spine. I want that kind of grace in my own life. I don’t like holding grudges. Seeking revenge saps all my energy and fills my system with poison. Besides, you never do get even. You only return evil for evil.

That’s what Jesus was trying to say when he told his disciples, “I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” He was talking “to those that listen.” *We* often are counted among those who do *not* listen. Jesus knew how difficult it is to forgive. He also knew that as difficult as it is to forgive, it is even more difficult to harbor ill will and nurture evil thoughts against those whom we perceive as our enemies.

Then, Jesus told his followers why they should forgive. “Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Did you hear what Jesus said? “God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” Most people think that the opposite is true. Namely, that God condemns the ungrateful and the wicked. Who are the ungrateful and the wicked? Well, we certainly can recognize others who fit in this category. But we don’t readily see ourselves in the same league as the wicked, even though there are times when we are ungrateful and wicked. That’s because it suits us to see the speck in our brother’s or sister’s eye while ignoring the telephone pole that’s in our own.

In his book, *The Mystery of Christ*. Father Robert Farrar Capon puts it this way:

“...the Good News of reconciliation and forgiveness is still the most important thing about [our sin.] There is no sin you can commit that God in Jesus hasn’t forgiven already. The only way you can get yourself in permanent Dutch is to refuse forgiveness. *That’s* hell. The old baloney about heaven being for good guys and hell being for bad guys is dead wrong. Heaven is populated entirely by forgiven sinners, not spiritual and moral aces. And hell is populated entirely by forgiven sinners. The only difference between the two groups is that those in heaven accept the forgiveness and those in hell reject it. Which is why heaven is a party – the endless wedding reception of the Lamb and his bride – and hell is nothing but the dreariest bar in town.
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A word about those who are victims of on-going mental and physical abuse. While we are called to forgive, we are not called to put ourselves in harm’s way. Anyone caught in a web of abuse of any kind needs to tell someone whom he or she can trust. Jesus always intervened on the side of the victim, the oppressed and the dispossessed. So, we can forgive those who abuse us but first we need to find a haven of safety and security where we are able to regain a sense of self-esteem. The victim of abuse often comes to believe that he or she has somehow caused the abuse by inciting the perpetrator’s anger or, in the case of sexual abuse, by being seductive. It is important to say unequivocally, **NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO ABUSE ANOTHER, NO MATTER WHAT THE SUPPOSED REASON OR RATIONALE FOR THE ABUSE.**

Once out of harm’s way, even victims of abuse will need to eventually come to terms with their desire for revenge lest it consume them. Grace calls each of us to recognize that we have sinned and fallen short of the mark. If we can see our own sinful nature and receive the grace of God’s forgiveness, then we can have the grace to forgive others. Ultimately, that’s what Joseph realized. The only way out of one’s self-imposed prison of hatred and revenge is grace. Evil begets evil. And revenge leads to destruction and death. When Joseph forgave his brothers, he said, “for God sent me before you to preserve life.” That’s what Jesus taught, also: ***Grace to forgive is the grace to live.*** Now, doesn’t that sound more appealing than merely getting even?

And let the people say, “Amen.”