

“Hunger is a strong motivator”
Text: Genesis 50:15-21: Matthews 18:21-35
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Hunger is a strong motivator. It's behind the persistent cry of a newborn baby. The whine of a toddler is often the mask hiding the need for a snack. Hunger can bring a growing teenager out from their den to enter the family space in the kitchen. And although it's not my eating rhythm, I know some awake for a cookie and glass of milk in the middle of the night. The rumbles and empty feeling in the tummy have the power to distract us in the most important moments to attend to the most basic of human needs.

It is just that kind of physical sensation that motivates Joseph's brothers to Egypt in the story from Genesis this morning. But please note: their hunger is not in the same category as the hungers I just described or any of us know. Those men have dared to cross the desert into enemy territory because they have been living in extreme drought for years. They have watched the women and children in their family and tribe grow thinner and struggle for the energy to complete daily tasks. I guess you're seeing in your mind's eye pictures from current news stories, just as I am. The sight of those bodies with little muscle and sunken eyes stay with us.

Now Joseph's brothers may not have looked quite that starved but their circumstances must be pretty dire for them to contact Joseph. Their history with him is not a pretty one. Their dad, Jacob, had 12 sons and his favorite was Joseph. Now we all know parents can have favorites but, in this case, Jacob had two wives - Leah and Rachael - and Rachael was the favorite so favoritism was in the family system before even one child was born.

By the time Rachael finally gave birth to her first child, Joseph, Jacob already had 10 sons by Leah. Finally, his favorite wife produced and no surprise, Joseph, and later Benjamin were Jacob's favorites. That's the family system that resulted in Joseph's ten older brothers plotting and succeeding in selling him to slave traders going to Egypt. You know the story. Years pass. Joseph, whose dreams provoked his brothers, has another dream which propels him into the Pharaoh's court. That's where his brothers find him - healthy, well-fed, bejeweled, and powerful. Quite a contrast from their own state of affairs.

So, hunger is a strong motivator and they are standing before him. Yet, there is something deeper gnawing inside those Israelites - something beyond tissue, muscle, and bone. There is something gnawing in their souls. Faced with Joseph after a time of absence from him, they admit the brokenness of their past relationship. Not just the serious event of selling their brother, but the ugly emotions and words woven in the small daily exchanges. The gnawing in their souls is a mirror of the reality before them. “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?”, they say to another. They are hungry for forgiveness. Finally, after a detour about their dead father, they ask for Joseph's forgiveness. Their deeper hunger has been fed and, from that depth, flow tears of healing and reconciliation.

Most forgiveness stories we experience or hear about end here. Forgiveness has been asked for. Forgiveness has been given. Isn't that enough? All any one could ask for? The past is forgiven.

But curiously, there is more to consider in our Genesis story. Joseph, the dreamer, sees more in their combined tears, bent knees, and forgiving hearts. For him, there is another dimension in this spiritual act of forgiving one another. There is something else besides the humans caught in the situation. As we sing in one of our hymns, "God is working his purpose out" in the warp and woof of life's situation. This means that besides forgiving each other personally, we have to forgive reality itself. As Joseph says to his brothers after the reconciliation, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today."

Now, forgiving reality is new idea for me so I've never noticed it in Joseph's story before. I always thought Joseph was saying pious-sounding words about God. But recently, someone suggested to me that part of our spiritual task around forgiveness is learning to forgive reality for not being what we need, want, demand that reality be for us. Joseph might be saying that he has learned that reality is not set up just for him. There is more going on in his life than even his visionary powers can show him. God is present. He can be humble and patient - with himself, with his brothers and, I suspect, with his dead dad who set up this twisted saga.

What that suggests to me is that when I forgive another person for hurting me, there is deeper spiritual lesson tucked in there for me to learn. While I'm practicing being a forgiving person, and accepting that all of us hurt each other, I can also practice accepting the "otherness" of just plain life. As in, people are complicated. Communities are messy. Relationships and love open us up to hurt.

Jesus calls us to bear the otherness of life around us. In the Matthew reading, Jesus tells us to forgive 77 times. He clearly stretches forgiveness beyond what we could ever imagine and surely ever do. But, Jesus has harsh words of those who get stuck judging and excluding those who are different and asking more of others than they can do.

According to Jesus, forgiveness stretches beyond an incident or a string of words. Forgiveness covers a much larger canvas, like the reality when Jesus hung on the cross. "Forgive them" were two of his last words and, given his 77 times, I think Jesus was including more the centurions on duty that day, and the disciples who denied and ran, and the corrupt religious and political officials. From where Jesus had come and who he had come to be as the Christ, his words were God's Words. In his body that day, forgiveness expanded to all creation and in all time. His words pronounced God's gift to all, a gift meant to be passed on and shared in our lives, in our communities and in the world. For as Joseph so wisely perceived when surrounded by forgiveness, "God intends it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people...." To preserve hungry physical bodies and also hungry souls. Amen.