

Forgiveness: Burden, Blessing, or Both?

You just heard them read, so you probably haven't had time to think much about this, but I wonder what, did you make of today's Old Testament and Gospel readings? Did you find them helpful? Comforting? Disquieting? Offensive? If the answer is "All of the above," that's a good sign that were listening carefully.

Take that first reading – the tearful reunion of Joseph and his brothers. Heartwarming – right? Joseph comes down from his perch by pharaoh's throne, reveals his true identity to his brothers, and tells them not to feel too bad about attempting to murder him and for selling him into slavery. **"Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves,"** he tells them, **"for God sent me ahead of you to preserve life . . . It was not you who sent me here, but God."**

Then Joseph kisses all his brothers and hugs their necks. It's a scene right out of a Hallmark greeting card.

Perhaps you recall the backstory to all this. It isn't pretty. Joseph's brothers hated him back in the day (and truth be told, he was an extremely obnoxious younger brother.) They hatched a plot to kill him but decided instead to chuck him into a pit and leave him for dead.

Along came a hairy bunch of Ishmaelites. The brothers sold Joseph into slavery, tore his annoying "coat of many colors" into shreds, and showed the tattered remains to their father as proof that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast.

Once in Egypt, Joseph went from slavery to relative privilege, then to prison after being falsely accused of rape. He languished there for years until he was remembered when the pharaoh needed help interpreting a dream. Joseph then enjoyed prominence as the pharaoh's vizier, the second most powerful man in Egypt.

When his brothers show up in Egypt desperate to buy grain in the middle of the very famine Joseph had predicted, he interprets this as divine providence. He reunites with his father and full-blood brother, saves them all from starvation, and brings them to Goshen to live in security.

All's well then ends well, right?

Well, yes, but I wouldn't blame you if you might have been thinking that the storyteller is being rather generous to Joseph's brothers and dismissive of Joseph's trauma and years of suffering. Apart from a few tense moments of wondering what might happen next, Joseph's brothers suffer no consequences for their terrible behavior.

And what do you make of Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Plain?

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also . . . do not judge and you will not be judged.

Is Jesus saying to victims of violence that God cares nothing for their suffering? Is he advising those Roman Catholic bishops who assembled in Rome last week to tell victims of abusive priests to forgive their abusers and withdraw their complaints? Is Jesus telling the Southern Baptist Convention to carry on as usual, ignoring hundreds of incidents of clergy sexual misconduct – the dirty secret that that isn't secret anymore?

T. Denise Anderson is a Presbyterian minister, a black woman, and the coordinator for racial and intercultural justice with the Presbyterian Mission Agency. She finds these texts the most difficult set of readings in the three-year cycle of the lectionary. Part of the reason is that they have so often been used as weapons to silence the voices of the suffering and insulate the powerful from responsibility.

Rev. Anderson quotes Zora Neale Hurston, who said, "If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it." She goes on to write:

Christians have often encouraged people to be silent about their pain, using the Bible as our justification. I have too many personal anecdotes of how these texts have been employed to silence the victimized so that others are not discomfited or inconvenienced by their difficult stories. More nefariously, we have used Jesus' words to actively encourage vulnerable people to stay in abusive environments and relationships. In this way, we have led people to their own slaughter and have done so in the name of Christ.¹

Being a white, reasonably well-educated male who lives his life in the corridor of white male privilege, these insights would probably not have occurred to me. It is only because wise and brave women like Denise Anderson continue to raise their voices that even old white guys like me must pay attention.

¹T. Denise Anderson, "Living by the Word," *The Christian Century*, January 15, 2019

The “Me too” moment has done more than raise consciousness and wreck the careers of prominent movie producers, politicians, and corporate heads. It has also provided another lens through which to read sacred texts and re-examine the church’s own history.

I have had women in abusive relationships come to me to seek help to escape their abuser. Some have come off the street. Some have been referred by Refuge House, and some were members of this or another congregation. Suppose I had said to those women, “Forgive your abuser. Pray for him. Go back to him and try not to provoke his anger in the future. Be like Joseph. Forgive.”

Several women told me that’s exactly what they had been told by other pastors. To give that message to a victim of abuse is to re-victimize the victim. Not only is that an abuse of a sister in Christ. It’s an abuse of holy scripture.

If you look closely at how Joseph’ story unfolds, you’ll see that God did not command Joseph to forgive his brothers. Instead, by a series of God-inspired experiences, Joseph came to a kind of peace regarding his brothers and their abuse. Looking back, he saw God acting in his own life, even in the face of the evil actions of those who should have loved and protected him.

By grace, Joseph came to see how God had been working in his own life to turn evil into good. **“You meant evil against me,”** he tells his brothers, **“but God meant it for good.”**²

Joseph does not condone the mistreatment inflicted upon him by his brothers. He calls it what it is: evil. But Joseph’s life is not defined by that evil.

The narrator does not say this in so many words, but I get the feeling that if Joseph had not forgiven his brothers, he would have remained imprisoned by anger and resentment in a dungeon not made by bars, but even more confining than that cell in pharaoh’s prison.

In Joseph’s case, forgiveness arises from the knowledge that God has been with him all along. At least for Joseph, forgiveness comes not as a burden, but as the fruit of God’s gracious presence. And it is only when he knows the blessedness of forgiving that Joseph comes to his true self and is able to invite reconciliation: **“Come closer . . . I am your brother Joseph whom you sold into Egypt.”**

Without denying the pain of his own victimization, Joseph discovers his true self – his true self blessed by God. Perhaps that’s what Jesus means when he says, **“Be merciful, just as your heavenly Father is merciful.”**

² Genesis 50:20

The apostle Paul says much the same to the church in Ephesus:

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.³

Only those who know God's mercy for themselves can forgive as they have been forgiven. For them, forgiveness is not a burden, but a blessing.

I began this sermon by asking you if you found these readings helpful, or comforting, disquieting or offensive. I do not ask you to choose one. Depending on where you stand the answer could vary.

If you are the victim of abuse in your family – if you have experienced the pain of discrimination because of who you are – if even now as an adult, you bear in your soul the pain of childhood trauma, I hope you do not hear these words as God's indifference to your pain.

Instead, hear them as God's assurance that God is with you even in your pain, and God can take the evil in your life and bend it toward the good.

And if you are wondering if God knows the true "you" – if are doubting that God loves you as you really are -- then hear again these words as good news:

You are accepted, you are welcomed.
 You are washed clean, you are raised up.
 You are forgiven, you are set free.
 In the love of Jesus Christ, you are loved forever.

³ Genesis 50:20