

## **The Agony of Forgiveness**

sermon digest

March 25, 2012

Acts 7:9-15; Genesis 50:14-21

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During Lent, we have explored a primary theme in Genesis, the book of beginnings—*the problem of evil in God's good creation*: the fall from innocence in the Garden of Eden, Cain's murder of Abel, God's response to human evil in the Flood, and the myth of Babel and ethnic diversity. The first eleven chapters of Genesis come from the twilight zone of human awareness, stories for children to explain the unexplainable. To treat the stories as science or factual history does a disservice to the intention of the writers, yet to ignore the universal problem of evil that lurks behind the stories is as foolish as defending a flat earth in a three-storied universe.

In the first murder, Cain and Abel, we get a hint of the direction of Genesis. Evil is a family problem. With the appearance of Abram/Abraham (11:26ff) the human story centers in the Jewish family nation. One would expect the end of the universal struggle with evil in the People of the Covenant, but the problem persists. I encountered an interesting article in the somewhat conservative *Calvin Theological Journal* (43, Ap 1, 2008) by Michael J. Williams, "Lies, Lies, I Tell You! The Deceptions of Genesis" that locates no less than fifteen incidents of deception in Genesis, most of which occur in the Jewish family and five in the story of Joseph. The problem of evil persists. We cannot ignore Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham's search for ten righteous people or the conflict between the twins Jacob and Esau and Jacob's theft of the family birthright.

***The agony of emotional pain is rooted in family.*** The point of Genesis becomes apparent in the story of Jacob/Israel's family, the biography of Joseph, and the relocation of the family/nation in Egypt. Although Joseph is portrayed with a few minor exceptions as the perfect patriarch, the theme of evil in God's good creation emerges as the Jewish family feud. So the people of promise stumble from pillar to post, eventually erupting into civil war and national division. The story of Joseph gets to the core issue of evil as it plays out in family conflict. *If the Jewish family and by implication the human family is to survive, the agonizing process of forgiveness must lead to the healing of community in reconciliation.*

Mother was the second child in a family of nine surviving children. As the oldest daughter in rural Oklahoma, her childhood was burdened with heavy adult responsibilities for her siblings and household management. She was always something of a second mother to her younger siblings and companion caretaker with her own mother. In high school she was assigned primary care for her paraplegic cousin. At age fourteen she drove the two of them in the family Model-T Ford some twenty miles to the big city of Heavener to high school and assisted her cousin in mobility as well as basic human necessities. By her own admission, the burden of caring for her cousin became so difficult to manage that she dropped out of high school in the eleventh grade and married at the tender age of eighteen. I grew up with family stories: bad memories of cousin Juanita's demands, family resentment of Mother's abandonment of duty, jealousies between Mother's siblings rooted in childish immaturity, and a lot of emotion about family expectations that permeated our own family ties. Ironically, the basic connection to family was a bond of love for one another that reached beyond the family history of injury and resentment. As a child, I found that family was at best an ambiguous human institution. The love and affection natural to family was constantly threatened by shared space and relationships.

I recall a sermon by Walter "Buddy" Shurden when he was Dean of Theology at Southern Seminary. Based on Jeremiah's (29) letter to Exiles telling them to make peace with the Babylonians, Buddy remembered his own childhood family and all of the dynamics of family undercurrents behind the hugs and kisses in their family reunions. Buddy rang my bell when he made the blanket comment that *families never get together without the need of forgiveness*. I thought of my Mother's family and all of the resentments that continued to hang in the air and the tensions that sometimes continued to reside in my love for my own siblings. I was guilty as charged with wacking my sister on the head with a big rock when I was four and bullying my younger brother well into my teen years. I have often wished that I could turn back the clock and undo childish behavior or that we could grow out of the tensions that seemed to go with the territory of family togetherness. As a pastor, I have seen the ongoing problem of dealing with resentments of victims while striving to manage the guilt of perpetrators.

***The family bond of love requires forgiveness.*** I was a summer youth director in a suburban church in Houston before entering seminary. I was working with the first wave of the baby boom generation. The large balloon of population growth after the War was progressing into the teen years. The population explosion was obvious to anyone driving through the typical suburban neighborhood, but the church faced significant problems with suddenly having to find space and ministry to accommodate the teenage masses. I was struggling with my own naivete working with naive teens in a church that thought in terms of simple answers to complex issues. One of our best families contributed significantly to the teen population with five children. The parents were pillars of the church and models for the way a Christian family should behave. Since I was moving toward marriage at the end of summer and the subject was appropriate for all teens, I asked the model parents to tell us about how a Christian marriage works. We were encouraged toward church attendance and family devotions, but a bit of honesty invaded the ideal picture when the husband and wife confessed to having disagreements in their marriage. The problem was quickly put aside with the “answer”; their rule in marriage was never to let the sun go down on their anger. It wasn’t bad advice, but I found that it was a bit naive and, at least for my marriage, impossible to enforce. In real life I found that people who genuinely love one another need more than twelve hours to settle big issues. Blisters formed from years of rubbing one another the wrong way do not often heal just because of a time limit on debate. Sometimes our painful family injuries require twice as much time to heal as to produce.

Reading about Joseph and his brothers engages both our *recognition* and *relief*. Most of us *recognize* the family dynamics of sibling rivalry, while we are *relieved* that our own families are a cut above the twelve sons of Jacob. Perhaps healthy adults can get beyond childish jealousies and resentments, but how do you ever get beyond attempted murder or the enslavement of a brother? Dirty little family secrets seem to stick to the children of Abraham from incest to theft that imply little or no evolution or progress. But one clear truth stands. The family connection to inflicting pain and suffering on one another is directly proportional to the close proximity of our existence. In order to rub someone the wrong way, you have to be close enough to rub. Family problems arise because we share space, we share the necessities of life, we share emotional ties to the same parents, and we indeed share love for one another. Strangers may inflict injury, but emotional pain comes from emotional involvement. No one can inflict injury on another as much as a sibling, a parent, a child, or a spouse. The identical behaviors coming from total strangers may inflame anger and drive us to retaliate, but wars with aliens never carry the emotional baggage that we find in families.

The story of Joseph is deeply emotional. We quickly connect to the fear of his brothers and the emotional upheaval in Joseph’s mind as we see ourselves in the mirror of the family situation. Joseph’s weeping over the reunion with his brothers, the retaliatory toying with the brothers’ fears, and the brothers’ guilt in remembering what they had done to Joseph are all too familiar. But the final issue is resolution.

After the death and burial of their father Jacob, the brothers appeal to Joseph’s sense of compassion over his need for revenge. This is the only place where we get a hint that Jacob what had actually happened to Joseph. The brothers appeal to their father’s will for reconciliation in the family. They feared that a grudge remained to be satisfied for Joseph that he had withheld until the death of his father. It has been evident from the moment that Joseph revealed himself to his brothers that his brotherly affection was still present, but love and justice are often poles apart. To extract justice on his brothers, Joseph would have to retaliate, inflicting as much pain on himself as he had experienced at the hands of his brothers. On the other hand, Joseph does not seem to be able to come out with the Mark Twain “Aw shucks, Tom Sawyer; tweren’t nutin’” to his brothers, acting as if nothing had happened. He found resolution of the conflict in the providence of God. “You intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people.”

***Forgiveness is an agonizing process that moves toward reconciliation.*** Neither Joseph nor his brothers could forget or undo the past. The scars from old injuries would not only last for their lifetimes, but they would become a part of the family history preserved for posterity to our time.

I recall the comment that John Claypool made in response to my question in a conference several years ago. I questioned the ease with which forgiveness was advocated by outsiders as if forgiveness were something cheap and easy. John defended his point with the statement: "Forgiveness is a gift that we give ourselves." We not only need to release others from their guilt; we must release ourselves from a commitment to revenge. I had to agree that the one sure way that an injury can be made to last a lifetime is for the injured party to continue to nurse a grudge.

But the experience behind my question was not satisfied by the necessity of forgiveness. I have found that forgiving a brother is never easy and always painful. Facing up to the truth and acknowledging that I have caused hurt or I have been hurt requires both courage and endurance. Once you open the door to the truth, you have to keep on going until you open all of the closets. The truth with Joseph, never acknowledged however, is that his arrogance as a youth inspired a lot of his brother's hatred. Another closet was his father's deception of Uncle Esau in addition to the cardinal sin of a parent, preferring one child over another. My point with which I continue to struggle is that forgiveness is never a simple declaration of innocence that wipes the slate clean for everyone involved. There is a real process of atonement involved even when punishment for evil has been set aside. Usually the pain of forgiveness is born by the victim.

One morning in the mid 1990's I received a phone call from an attorney in Knoxville. He was filing a lawsuit against the City of Oak Ridge in behalf of his client and was exploring whether I could serve as a witness in his case. His client had gone to war to prevent the placement of the International Friendship Bell on City property. After losing his original battle, he declared war on the bell to have it removed. He was filing suit asking the courts to remove the bell because it violated the First Amendment conflicting government with religion. I had testified in support of the bell before the City Council stating that I had a Japanese daughter-in-law. I wanted her to feel welcome in our city. The attorney wanted to know if she was going to offer Buddhist prayers at the bell.

The battle of the bell in Oak Ridge was one of those situations where we have had a choice like that of Joseph. The real issue behind the bell was the necessity of leaving the anger of Pearl Harbor behind or allowing an element of Japanese culture to invade our life space. World War II had never ended for some of our neighbors in this cosmopolitan city.

The message for us is clear. Joseph could not retain a grudge for his brothers. In the larger human family, we cannot carry grudges toward ours. In this global community that has emerged from the twentieth century, we are siblings in the human family. However painful it may be, we have a duty before God to seek the peace of the global city in which we dwell.