

Genesis 49: 28-33; 50: 15-21
Romans 14: 1-8
Matthew 18: 21-22

Remember, Repent, Renew
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Alliteration- you may have noticed that the sermon title has a lot of r-e words. As I read over the passage from the book of Genesis, it made me want to add one more as a preface. It's "regress."

Have you ever noticed the way that adult siblings or adult children have a way of regressing when they go home to visit? People who have, over time, become mature and competent, suddenly start treating their parents and siblings as though they are moody 15-year-olds, or irresponsible 12-year-olds. Old wounds and old stories resurface. Some of it is kind of wonderful: the old jokes are often still funny, and these are the people who remember all kinds of good times from the past. But they can also make you a little bit crazy, as they bring up for the millionth time some slight or grievance that needs forgetting. And you want to say, "Lord, how many times do I have to hear the story about the parakeet and the cat? As many as seven times?" And it turns out that the answer is, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." We love our families, but the regression, not to mention repetition, reiteration and recapitulation, can be a bit much.

The book of Genesis is mostly about families: about how strong they can be and, more often, how dysfunctional they can be. The stories are not always edifying in themselves, but they show a certain persistence on God's part as human failings, with the occasional bright moment of human wisdom, are on display, time and time again. The author used the last 14 chapters of the book to tell the story of Joseph and his brothers, and today, we get the very end of that saga.

Talk about sibling rivalry! As young adults, these 12 brothers did not get along. The older brothers were jealous of Joseph and sold him into slavery, telling their father Jacob that he had died. Years later, Joseph had worked his way to the top of the Egyptian social ladder, and in his turn deceived and tormented the brothers when they came looking for grain during a famine. Finally, in chapter 45, there is a tearful reconciliation, and old father Jacob is brought to Egypt to enjoy the reunion and the new good fortune of wealth and security. Should be the happily-ever-after moment.

Except that it's not. Following Jacob's death and burial, Joseph's brothers remembered that crime of their past – the one where they basically sentenced their brother to death by slavery. And they couldn't live with that memory. They were still afraid. There's no indication at all that Joseph was harboring any resentment by this time. This is a kind of regression to an unresolved moment of the past. They need to repent...again. Interesting twist: they do this by telling a lie- or a fib – saying that it was their father's deathbed wish that Joseph forgive them, as they call themselves, "the servants of the God of your father." Just bringing this all up again makes Joseph weep. And then the brothers weep, and throw themselves on his mercy as slaves.

Then Joseph speaks some of the most beautiful, wise, and magnanimous words in Scripture: "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people." Joseph is able to take old memories, and tearful repentance, and magically create a renewed – and much stronger- family bond.

Remember, repent, and renew. This is the good news we hear at the end of Genesis. But we have to admit, this is kind of an extreme case. Most of us do not sell our younger brothers into slavery, or tell our fathers that they were killed by wild animals. We tend to have less dramatic, but perhaps equally hurtful, reasons to remember, repent and renew.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul is addressing some conflict in the early Roman church. Even though they were under threat and persecution from the outside, they still manage to find opportunities for family squabbles. It seems that these squabbles were about things like eating meat, drinking wine, and keeping certain holy days. These disagreements threatened to tear the community apart. They had regressed into bickering.

Paul refuses to give categorical pronouncements on these issues, but instead, surprisingly, says none of this really matters. Living in an attitude of gratitude is the overriding concern. Echoing Joseph's words, "Am I in the place of God?" Paul asks, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God?" Remember what we are really all about. Repent of being judgmental or narrow-minded. Renew the community: recommit to belonging to God and each other.

That first step, remembering, is so important. Joseph did not forget what had happened on the day his world changed and his brothers turned on him as a 17-year-old boy. As a middle-aged man, he looks his brothers squarely in the eye and says, "You intended to harm me." He cannot excuse their actions. So one of the sad lessons we learn in community is that some can intend us harm. I hate having to teach this. I hate the fact that my children and other loved ones suffered pain as they grew up. But it makes me more determined that along with the threat and the pain, I pass along tools for growing into hopeful people.

I find these tools in our traditions and in the life of this community. This is a place where we read Scripture, with all its stories of dysfunctional families and violence and pain and mistakes. We read some of them because they tell us how **not** to behave. We read some of them because we see our own shortcomings and pain in them. But woven through them are words of inspiration and forgiveness that help us to move on. In community, we read these words to remind us of the daily necessity of repentance and compassion. With Joseph, we reframe the world where we have been harmed and look to a future of God's intention. So often, as in that story, the path forward is through memory **and** forgiveness.

Jesus spoke to his disciples about the need to forgive. Peter, in the Gospel passage, wants to quantify a practice of forgiving his neighbor, so he asks for a definite number to go by, like seven. Though still using numerical language, Jesus removes the action of forgiving from the realm of counting and into the realm of habitual practice. "Not seven, but seventy seven," is a way of saying, "stop counting." He is offering us an immeasurable gift of freedom. This forgiving habit takes work and struggle and intention, but it brings freedom to the giver and the receiver.

We can turn to leaders who have put this biblical theory of forgiveness into practice. Archbishop Desmond Tutu helped lead South Africa through truth and reconciliation after Apartheid came to an end. This involved thousands of acts of confession and forgiveness, of remembering, repenting and renewal. Tutu wrote: "Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. It means taking what happened seriously and not minimizing it; drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our entire existence. It involves trying to understand the perpetrators and so have empathy, to try to stand in their shoes and appreciate the sort of pressures and influences that might have conditioned them."

In other words, forgiveness does not have to mean forgetting, and reconciliation is not always possible. There are some things beyond our power, but we are given the tools to make a beginning. In the process, we may find that we receive a gift. As Tutu writes: “Forgiving means abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin, but it is a loss that liberates the victim.”

As I read through these words, I find that I take issue with the archbishop’s use of the word “victim.” Surely we need to shed that role of victim in order to move beyond the present. It takes a huge amount of strength to forgive, and if we identify ourselves as victims we may not find that strength. Indeed, we are more likely to respond with violence if we cling to that self-understanding.

Side by side with the stories of trauma, I want to tell stories of life and generosity and hope and compassion and forgiveness. In this, the 200th year of this congregation, I find myself searching for those stories in our history, as well as in Scripture. In particular, I look for ways that people behaved in times of stress and tragedy and social injustice. I read about the women who formed an anti-slavery society in the 1840’s in this church. They were far from the places where slavery was a way of life, but they refused to ignore it; in small ways they tried to help fugitive slaves who had made their way to Canada by distant routes. I read about the prayer group that evolved into Bridges for Peace in the early 1980’s, when the Cold War threatened to erupt into a Hot War. Prayer became action, and citizen exchanges allowed Russians and Americans to break bread together in Norwich and Moscow. I remember our responses to a rash of church burnings in the south, or a hurricane in the Dominican Republic. I remember our careful consideration of inclusion of GLBTQ folks. All of these crises were an opportunity for renewal. Every time one of you reaches out in compassion to a neighbor who is suffering, you are saying that the wound or the flood or the betrayal will not have the last word. What we demonstrate in these times of stress is our legacy. We can teach it and we can live it. In fact I believe that we are uniquely equipped to teach it and to live it.

Our tradition is full of brothers sold into slavery, of crosses, of persecution. But over and over again we are told that a power exists to speak a word beyond those realities... a divine word that creates the world anew. We echo that word in acts of forgiveness and deeds of compassion.

Often I hear the news pundits say the phrase, “there is no silver bullet.” In other words, there is no quick, simple solution. So, we have to remind ourselves, there is no silver bullet that will erase the difficult memories of national or personal tragedy. There is no magic number of times to forgive, or times to be generous, or times to be kind. These are daily tasks, a way of life, almost a habit. Here, over the years, people have cultivated and supported those tasks and habits. Day after day, we transform our world through forgiving and learning and doing, and we find we become joyful and purposeful in the process. We forget to be victimized by our past, because the present and the future hold so much promise.

This church family has survived for 200 years so far. It is a family where people have wounded each other and supported each other. People have asked for and granted forgiveness. We have, at times, followed the advice of Paul and allowed certain issues to be matters of personal conscience. But we do all this not because we have arrived, but because we are still on the road. Renewal is never complete. The family can always become both closer and more inclusive. I rejoice to be in the company of this weak, strong, flawed and gifted congregation. The best is yet to come. Thanks be to God. Amen.