

**Foundational Stories Series**  
**“On Forgiveness and the Stewardship of Pain”**  
**Sermon on Genesis 45:1-15 (8/30 & 8/31/14)**  
**Jennifer M. Hallenbeck**

---

Before I officially begin this sermon, I just want to let you know my sermon took a bit of a turn *after* I'd chosen the title and *after* that title was printed in this weekend's worship bulletins. So, while this *is* a sermon about forgiveness, I will not be talking about the “stewardship of pain.” That will perhaps be a sermon for another time. If you're curious, though, I'd be happy to talk with you about that another time!

// //

If you've been around McCabe the last couple of months, you are likely aware that we are in the middle of a rather lengthy sermon series called “Foundational Stories.” This series is centering around many of the earliest stories of the Bible...so far we've been in Genesis – the first book of the Bible – but, next week, we'll move into Exodus, the Bible's second book.

Our reading from Genesis chapter 45 comes at the tail end of Genesis and it focuses on Joseph and his brothers. Up to this point in Genesis, we've been learning all about Joseph's family: about his brothers...about his father, Jacob, and Jacob's four wives... about his grandparents, Isaac and Rebekah...and about his great-grandparents, Abraham and Sarah.

These folks were the first people to have chosen to follow our God as their God – which is why their stories are “foundational” to us. These people were the first Israelites, the first Jews...and, since Jesus our Savior was Jewish, understanding *their* stories is critically important as we understand our own story as Christian people.

//

Now, when Abraham began following our God as his God, God promised Abraham three things: that Abraham would receive the land we call Israel...that Abraham would have many descendants...and that those descendants would not only *be* blessed, but that the world would be blessed through them.

Undergirding this three-fold promise, was God's over-arching promise to be faithful to Abraham's family, and to be faithful to the three-fold promise forever...no matter what...even when Abraham and his descendants behaved really, really terribly.

Which brings us to *Joseph's* part of Abraham's family tree.

//

Joseph was the second youngest of thirteen children: twelve boys and one girl. Joseph's father, Jacob, had these thirteen children by four women – two were his wives, two were his wives' servants.

While the thought of four women for one man is a bit horrifying for all sorts of reasons today, it was not all that uncommon back then. But, common or not, the book of Genesis makes it clear there was all sorts of jealousy between the four women and, by extension, between their children.

Jacob – the patriarch of the family – did *not* help matters much. In fact, he almost always made things worse. For starters, Jacob married Leah first, but he'd *really* wanted to marry Leah's younger sister Rachel.

And, even though he'd already had several children by Leah when he finally married *Rachel*, Jacob clearly favored Rachel over Leah. (Which probably didn't help the sisters' relationship with each *other*.)

Anyway, Rachel had trouble conceiving so, by the time she had Joseph – the first of *her* two children – Jacob had already had eleven other children. Yet, because Joseph was born by Rachel – Jacob's favorite wife – *Joseph* very quickly became Jacob's favorite *child*.

Joseph regularly received special treatment from Jacob and even got a fancy, very expensive coat from his father that was nothing like any coat his siblings ever got. And Joseph wasn't particularly humble either. He knew he was the favorite and he acted like it.

One day his older brothers had had enough: when Joseph was just a kid – a pre-teenager, probably – his brothers sold him into slavery to a group of traveling foreigners...and told their father that Joseph had been eaten by a wild animal.

That was the story we heard in worship last week. And, during my sermon last week, I recommended that you read through chapters 37 to 45 in preparation for this week's message...because a *lot* happens in those eight chapters of Scripture. Here's the synopsis of what happened next:

After the brothers had sold Joseph to the traveling foreigners, in order to “prove” to their father, Jacob, that Joseph had been attacked by a wild animal and killed, Joseph's brothers stole his fancy coat, ripped it, dipped it in goat blood, and showed it to Jacob...whose heart was instantly broken.

(Little did Jacob know, however, his favorite son had not, in fact, been killed by a wild animal, but was instead on his way to years of slavery in Egypt.)

Joseph lived as a slave in Egypt and did years of the kind of hard work he had often avoided back home, having been the favored child and all. *Then*, after years of hard, slave labor, a false accusation landed Joseph in prison.

Now...Genesis doesn't give us a clear timeline on how many years Joseph was in slavery or in prison down in Egypt – we just know that, at some point, he was granted a reprieve.

See, as we talked about last week, Joseph had always been a dreamer: he had dreams that, when interpreted, somehow managed to predict the future. And not only did Joseph *have* these kinds of dreams himself, he could also interpret the dreams of *others*.

Well, while Joseph was in prison in Egypt, the king – the Pharaoh, as the Egyptian kings were called – began having troubling dreams. The Pharaoh got wind of this prisoner who could interpret dreams...so Joseph was called in to save the day.

Unfortunately the news was not good: the dreams the Pharaoh was having seemed to indicate there would be some very lean times ahead...that, after seven years of bumper crops, Egypt would then experience seven years of famine.

The Pharaoh was so impressed by Joseph's dream interpretation, that Joseph became a trusted advisor to him. In that role, Joseph, not only helped the nation of Egypt prepare for the famine during those years of plenty...he also helped them through the famine itself – including being the one who had oversight of the grain storehouses during the famine. If you wanted food, you had to get Joseph's approval.

//

Now...while Egypt was experiencing *their* famine, Joseph's own family was experiencing the same famine – back in his home country of Canaan, hundreds of miles away.

However, the folks back home had not had the luxury of knowing it was coming: they hadn't been able to store up in the years of plenty so they'd have enough in the years of famine.

Jacob had heard there was grain to spare for sale in Egypt, so he sent all of his sons – except Benjamin, the youngest – to Egypt to buy grain.

(He didn't send Benjamin because Benjamin was Jacob's only other child by his favorite wife, Rachel...and, since Jacob thought he'd already lost Joseph, his first child with Rachel, he didn't want to risk losing Benjamin, too.)

When Joseph's brothers went before him to buy grain in Egypt, *Joseph* recognized them, but *they* didn't recognize Joseph...so Joseph played a trick on them, telling them he thought they were spies. They replied they were not, in fact, spies...but had come from the land of Canaan where they had left their father and youngest brother behind.

At that point Joseph went even further in his trickery.

He told his brothers he didn't trust them and that he wouldn't trust them unless one of them stayed in jail while the others went back to Canaan and brought their youngest brother back with them to Egypt. A strange plan on Joseph's part, yes, but his brother's did what he told them to do – they were at his mercy for food, after all.

So the brothers returned to Canaan and, eventually, their father, Jacob, agreed to let them bring Benjamin to Egypt with them. Plus, by then, they needed more food *and* they had to get their brother Simeon out of jail, where they had left him as collateral for their trip back to Canaan to get Benjamin. (It's a twisted, confusing story...I know.)

At this point, if you are thinking Joseph had put his brother through enough, you are wrong. Joseph was not done messing with them yet.

After the brothers – with Benjamin – stood before Joseph, they all had a meal together and, before sending the brothers on their way back home to Canaan with more grain, Joseph had his servant put a precious silver cup in the grain sack Benjamin was to carry...making it appear as though Benjamin had stolen the cup.

Then, not long after the brothers had left on their journey home, Joseph had his servant go after them to retrieve the silver cup. And, to be as dramatic as possible, Joseph told his servant to accuse the brothers of stealing the cup.

The servant did exactly as he was told...and, after accusing the brothers of stealing this silver cup, the brothers responded, indignantly, that they would never do such a thing... and if, in fact, one of them *had* stolen the cup, he could take that brother and either kill him or make him a slave.

When they searched through their bags of grain and discovered the cup in Benjamin's bag, the brothers began mourning what would become of Benjamin...and then they headed back to see Joseph.

Upon seeing Joseph and explaining what had happened, Judah offered to have all of the brothers become Joseph's slaves as punishment for the “stolen” cup. Joseph, however, did not accept this offer and said that only the one responsible for the “stolen” cup should pay for his misdeed.

However, the brothers were abundantly aware of how precious Benjamin was to their father, Jacob. So...Judah made an impassioned plea to Joseph that Benjamin be forgiven. This plea is the last 17 verses of chapter 44 and it is what immediately precedes today's reading from chapter 45.

The final words of Judah's plea to Joseph on Benjamin's behalf are these: “Sir, I am your slave. Please let me stay here in place of Benjamin and let him return home with his brothers. How can I face my father if Benjamin isn't with me?”

“I couldn't bear to see my father in such sorrow.”

*Then* today's reading, again, begins with these words: “Since Joseph could no longer control his feelings in front of his servants, he sent them out of the room. When he was alone with his brothers, he told them, 'I am Joseph.' ... Joseph asked his brothers if his father was still alive, but they were too frightened to answer. Joseph told them to come closer to him, and when they did, he said: 'Yes, I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt. Don't worry or blame yourselves for what you did [to me]. God is the one who sent me ahead of you to save lives.’”

Now...from the beginning of Creation, God gave humans the gift of free will, so I do not believe God was some sort of puppet master, orchestrating all the details of Joseph's and his brothers' lives – controlling them to sell Joseph into slavery and then manipulating the Pharaoh to appoint Joseph to a position of power.

God is not a puppet master. God does not manipulate us or cause bad things to happen in order to then cause *good* things. No. But...God *does* work to bring good in the midst of bad.

And there were some of very good things that God brought out of Joseph's toxic relationship with his brothers: namely, that Joseph ended up using power for good in the midst of Egypt's famine...and, of course that he eventually reconciled with his brothers. Eventually, they all found forgiveness.

// //

I told you at the beginning of this sermon that it took a turn in a new direction after I'd already chosen a title and after the bulletins were printed.

I found myself working on this sermon quite late on Friday night. At about midnight, I was reading through chapter 44 when something struck me:

Joseph did not extend forgiveness to his brothers until *after* his brother Judah made a passionate plea to Joseph on behalf of Benjamin.

Up to that point, Joseph had just been nasty to his brothers, manipulating them and convincing them they had stolen something they hadn't really stolen...perhaps to get back at them for having sold him into slavery so many years ago? Who knows why.

What we do know is that Joseph didn't change his tune until Judah spoke desperately on Benjamin's behalf.

Judah was one of Leah's sons with their father Jacob. (Leah was the one Jacob was tricked into marrying first when he really wanted to marry Leah's younger sister, Rachel. And, remember that Joseph and Benjamin were *Rachel's* sons with Jacob.)

This may seem a bit irrelevant, but, it is at least worth mentioning that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was from *Judah's* family line. When this occurred to me late Friday night, it felt like a shot of Holy Spirit adrenaline.

Forgiveness and reconciliation did not happen between Joseph and his brothers until *Judah* begged Joseph for forgiveness on Benjamin's behalf – even to the point of saying he, Judah, would be Joseph's slave in Benjamin's place in order to keep Benjamin free.

Perhaps there was just always something about Leah...and about Judah... and about all the grandfathers and grandmothers, the mothers and fathers who followed that family line – all the way to Jesus' mother, Mary. Perhaps there was just always something about forgiveness in that particular family line.

Whatever the case may be, thank God for all of them because through them was born the Savior the world...the King of our souls, the Forgiver of all sins. What was good news through for Joseph and his brothers through Judah and Judah's mother Leah became good news for us all. Amen.