

... As We Forgive Those Who Trespass Against Us

³ Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.

⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! ⁵ And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. ⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

⁸ "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. ... ¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.

If your four year old child or grandchild asked you what forgiveness is, what would you say? How would you define it? For the fun of it, I looked up "forgive" in the Thesaurus. Here are some synonyms: condone, excuse, exculpate, pardon, remit. What do you think of those? To me condone falls well short. To condone means that you accept it. If I condoned what you did, I am not forgiving you because condone suggests it was not all that bad. What about excuse? I don't like that word, either. Adam sinned, and when God confronted him with it, he had an excuse, "It was the woman's fault." Again, if there is an excuse, then there is nothing to forgive. What about exculpate? I think that is the first time I spoke that word. It is not a common word, but it is not a bad. It literally means to take some sort of guilt or blame, *culpa* in Latin, and you *extra* it or drive it away. But I doubt if that will help your four year understand forgiveness any better. Then you have pardon. That is not so bad. To pardon means to release someone from punishment. How about remit? I haven't used that word since the King James Version. But it is a good word. It means the same thing as pardon, to cancel a penalty.

But does this help explain forgiveness to a four year old? I always like to use examples to explain words. And we have a very good example of forgiveness today in our Old Testament Reading. So that four year olds and adults both can appreciate forgiveness better, let's will look at Joseph's example and see how forgiveness is something God gives us and something we share with others.

I. Joseph was forgiven as are we.

³ Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" What is so special about this passage? I see my brother maybe once a year if that. When we meet, we hug with that kind of manly hug which hugs but not too much. And then we ask how everyone is doing. Joseph hadn't seen his brothers for around twenty four years! Naturally He asked about his father. Is he still alive? How's he doing? How are you guys doing?

But this scene is strange. To understand how strange it is, ask yourself why Joseph hadn't seen his brothers or father for twenty four years. Remember? Joseph was the second youngest of a large family, and this family was a mess. Joseph had a mother, a father, three stepmothers, ten step-brothers, one brother, and a step sister, all living under the same roof except for his mother who died shortly after giving birth to his younger brother, Benjamin. Jacob, his father, loved Joseph's mother more than the three step mothers. He showered her two children, Joseph and Benjamin, with more love and favors.

One day Joseph showed off an expensive coat that his father gave him. He proudly bragged about it front of his eleven brothers. And then he told them about two dreams God gave him, both of which said that one day all his brothers, even his father, will bow down to him. How do you think that went over in a family where thirteen kids are born of four separate mothers and dad favored some children over others? His brothers burned with anger and jealousy. They grabbed him and ripped off that coat. They planned to kill him, but decided to sell him as a slave. To cover this up, they tore up his coat, covered it with blood and claimed that Joseph was mauled to death by a wild animal.

What is sad is we expected that. We understand why the brothers acted this way. We shouldn't. In a sinless world, Joseph's brothers would not have become angry or jealous. They would have been happy for Joseph. Yes, Joseph bragged about it, but so what? But this is not a sinless world. They burned with jealousy and anger and they let it out.

How about you and me? C.S. Lewis, the Christian apologist from England, said something profound. If you are angry at a proud man, this means that you are also committing the sin of pride. Does a proud person bother you? He bothers me. Why? Because he is proud? No. It is because I am proud. If you neighbor can afford a brand new truck with all the bells and whistles and your truck is held together with duct tape and has over 300,000 miles on it, we should be happy for him. But jealousy creeps in. We grow angry, we become jealous, we are dissatisfied that we have less, all because our hearts naturally are filled with such things.

The Bible says in Matthew, **For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.** This explains it, doesn't it. This explains why we have to teach kids to say please and thank you and not how to say, "Give me." This explains why the world is filled with selfish desires that hurt and ruin. This explains why God looks at the world and laments that there is no one who is righteous, not a single person. This explains why God will bring an end to this world. This

explains that people will not get away with it. What do you think he will say about pride, jealousy, selfishness, hatred coming out of our hearts? Will he condone them? No. Will he accept excuses? No.

That is why Joseph hadn't seen his brothers all those years. They hated him. They sold him as a slave. Joseph even spent years in the dungeons of Pharaoh. And now here they were standing before him. This time it wasn't eleven angry brothers picking on a weaker younger brother. This time Joseph had the power and authority as the second in command of Egypt. It was pay back time.

But it wasn't. ⁴Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!" ⁵And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. ⁷But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. ⁸"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. ... ¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.

Joseph forgave his brothers. How do we know that? Well, he didn't order the soldiers to seize his brothers, torture them and execute them. Quite the opposite. He saw the terror in their faces. He realized the guilt that was overcoming them. He immediately did all he could to relieve them of that guilt. ... **do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, ...** I think they were living with that guilt all those years. Three chapters earlier they admitted, **We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen.** They could not forget the face of Joseph pleading for his life.

What kind of guilt plagues you? What sins from your youth still bother you? What new sins do you see now? What do you wish you could take back? They will not stay covered up forever. In fact, we know that God sees them and one day he will ask us about them. There is no escaping sin. If only they would go away. Well, that is forgiveness.

That is what Joseph gave his brothers. He showed them he held no grudges. In fact, he told them that God had turned all this bad into good. God took their hate to put Joseph in a place where Joseph could save them. Under Joseph's care, Egypt had stockpiled enough food to survive, even to sell to the neighbors. There will be no mass starvation. Joseph had no grudges. He saw how God turned their hatred into a way for him to save their lives. And not just their lives, but the lives of the whole world. ⁸"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. ... ¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.

Joseph had the ability to forgive those who made his life miserable, not because Joseph was a virtuous man. It was because Joseph understood forgiveness himself. You don't see the same young Joseph who bragged about his magnificent coat or that others would bow down to him. Undoubtedly Joseph reflected on his own life, his own sinful life. God did not give him what he deserved. Joseph knew he lived under God's forgiving grace.

Forgiveness is never easy. The easy thing to do is to lash out or hold a grudge or get revenge. Forgiveness is hard. And don't think it was easy for God to forgive us. It was hard for God to send us Son into this world to die for sinners. From his three hour prayer in Gethsemane, we see it was hard for Jesus to take the sins of an entire world upon himself. It was hard for Jesus to offer his life for us. Yet, that is what God did for us. God doesn't turn the other way when he sees our sin. He doesn't condone them or excuse them. He exculpates them. He pardons them. He remits them. Jesus took the guilt and punishment of our sins to the cross.

In our gospel reading Jesus told us to forgive and not judge. Paul told us to bless our persecutors, not to repay anyone for the evil they do to us. It is hard, and a sinful nature tells us to get revenge. But God also made it easy. You see, it wasn't up to Joseph to forgive his brothers or not. We don't get to decide who should be forgiven and who should not. That is up to God. That is why we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." It is two sides of the same coin. They go hand in hand. When we relish the forgiveness God gives us, we will naturally forgive others.

But there is this pesky thing known as the sinful nature that gets in the way. Jealousy, anger, vengeance, are still there. That is why this thing called repentance, seeing the terrible sins still in our lives and going to God asking for forgiveness, is so important, even necessary. When we realize how much God saves us, well, we will find ourselves wanting the same even for our enemies.

Yes, you and I can explain forgiveness to another, even to a four year old. But help them really understand. Give them an example. Sure, you can tell show them how Joseph forgave his brothers. But how about you? Show them what Christ means to you as you forgive others as God has forgiven you. Amen.