

Sermon "Release"  
Kirk of St James  
Sunday September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023  
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

John Hopkins Medical School reported that they had found a procedure that will help improve your health. Some of the benefits of this procedure are lowering the risk of heart attack, improving both cholesterol levels and sleep quality; it will improve your immune system, and is also used for reducing pain, blood pressure, levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. Curious what this miracle procedure is called? Forgiveness. Believe or not John Hopkins Medical School released an article called "Forgiveness: Your Health Depends on It." All of the benefits that I have listed above are what happens when people find ways to forgive situations in their lives that cause them grief. Joseph certainly had a family story that one might want to forget, and numerous situations that required him to extend forgiveness.

Joseph's story starts out well in the beginning. He is a favourite among his father Jacob's children, and he is gifted a beautiful coat to wear that shows his status to any who see him. While things are going well for Joseph bitterness is beginning to grow among his brothers. They are working hard, they are helping the family, why does their father love Joseph so much more? Plus, Joseph was tattling on them telling their father what they were doing wrong. The tough thing about bitterness is that it is corrosive. It drips down through their lives until they can't see anything other than their anger toward him. When Joseph tells them he has had a vision of them bowing down to him, that seals his fate. One day when the brothers see the golden child walking toward them and they hatch a plan. They sell him into slavery in Egypt, divide up the money, tell their father his son is dead and continue with their lives.

I often wonder how life was for them after the caravan pulled away with Joseph and then later watching their father grieve. Over the years did they think of Joseph? Did they wonder

where he ended up or how life was for him? Did they ever imagine they would see him again? Or did they simply spend their money and forget about him entirely? It is not until years later that famine ravages the land and the brothers are forced to go to Egypt to see if they can scrape up enough food to keep their families alive. As you may remember Joseph does not reveal his identity to them, instead he chooses to put the brothers through a series of tests before revealing himself. It must have been a terrible shock to realize their lives literally lay in the hands of the brother they had betrayed.

No longer the troublesome little brother with his colourful coat and strange dreams. He was now the chief advisor to the Egyptian pharaoh. While Joseph's visions allowed him to store enough food to save people from total starvation "he helped expand Egypt's power around the region by trading with families who were terribly affected by the famine, had run out of seeds, sold their animals, and were at the mercy of the empire that took their land and held them as slaves." This certainly wasn't the little brother they had known. Joseph was powerful and he was consolidating Egypt's wealth and hold in the region.

So, it is interesting when we come to the passage this morning and once again find the brothers plotting. Their father had died, their guilt and their fear laid heavy on their minds, and they worry that with Jacob's death there is nothing to stop Joseph from taking his revenge, even though Joseph had already forgiven them. They try to figure out what to say to convince Joseph not to harm them. One writer describes this scene as "the exchange presents a touching scene of how forgiveness once offered can be hard to accept fully, so long as those forgiven hold onto their guilt. It also shows how hard it can be for people to change old habits in their interactions with others—even when one has opened one's self not only to receiving forgiveness but to extending it to others." The brothers have not yet accepted and believed Joseph's forgiveness.

The brothers understand that when they sold Joseph, they were not only wrong, they also could have cost him his life, his family, and his happiness. This is a family story of hurt that has existed for 22 years. What is interesting is how people's reactions in the story differ. The brothers originally intended evil for Joseph. Their bitterness drives them to do something unthinkable to their brother. Even years later that guilt, and uncertainty about their brother plagues them. In their minds there is no way he will be kind to them. There is no way they will not be punished. So, whether out of genuine repentance, or just a hope they can sway their brother they beg for forgiveness. No matter how much time passes the brothers cannot seem to break from old patterns of behaviour.

Joseph on the other hand has not appeared to allow himself to be bitter in the intervening years. Instead of being angry at his brothers he focus' his attention elsewhere. Later he is wrongfully accused and imprisoned and again he does not become bitter, he simply focuses on the future and on God. From a scared 17-year-old boy betrayed by his older brothers he grows into one of the most powerful men in Egypt. I always find it curious that even when he has the money and the means to return to his family and perhaps demand justice he does not. Joseph never allows himself to be swept away in bitterness and revenge and I believe that must have been hard. I wonder sometimes if the difference is Joseph knows when to let go. Joseph trusts that God is at work in his life through the ups and the downs.

This story illustrates several things. It shows how bitterness and jealousy can twist lives and cause people to act in unimaginable ways. It shows the danger of allowing such things to grow in our hearts until they take over our lives and prevent us from seeing anything good. It also demonstrates how knowing when to let go can help us grow. Joseph did not focus his life on revenge or bitterness instead he takes things as they come and lets them grow into something

he never could have dreamed—or maybe in Joseph's case he might have dreamed! It is all easier said than done isn't it?

Throughout our lives we may find ourselves in the position of each of the people in this narrative. Sometimes we may find ourselves in the position of Joseph's brothers. We have done something to cause hurt and we don't know how to ask for forgiveness or break old patterns in relationships, so we push on with our lives even if things hang heavy in our hearts. Perhaps there are also times when we have been offered forgiveness by another and we struggle to accept that forgiveness in our lives, we find ourselves unable to accept grace when it is offered and continue to live under a sentence of our own making.

Then there is the other side, maybe like Joseph we find that we have been wronged or deeply hurt. We know that reconciliation can be difficult work particularly when we are the person who has been wronged, or the other person does not acknowledge their wrongdoing. How do we move on from there? Joseph gives us a clue. I came across a powerful statement on forgiveness that I have found helpful it says "Forgiveness means to release, to let go of the other. Forgiveness is not denying out hurt. When we minimize what has happened to us, gloss over it, tell ourselves it was not really that bad, we cannot really forgive. Forgiveness is a possibility only when we acknowledge the negative impact of another person's actions or attitudes in our lives..." It took several meetings with his brothers before Joseph eventually forgave them, and I don't know if the brothers ever truly repented or not. I don't believe it was easy for him but, holding onto his belief in God he found a way forward in his life.

I pray that if you are having trouble asking for forgiveness for something that you overcome your struggles and find a way. I pray that if you are having trouble accepting forgiveness and grace in your life that your heart finds a way to open to the possibility. I pray

that if you have been hurt or wronged that you find a way of letting go, a path of forgiveness that does not minimize your hurt but, does allow you to live out from under the pain that was caused you. Sometimes it makes my heart ache when I know how people's lives have been damaged by another so I can only imagine God's anguish on our behalf. May we all live into the love and freedom that is made possible in God.

