

Remember and Renew

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September 11, 2011

Genesis 50:15-21

Psalm 103:(1-7), 8-13

Matthew 18:21-35

It has been pretty intense this past week, hearing the stories of September 11, 2001. In many ways I would rather forget that day, and yet we can't. We remember the weather, what we were doing, where we were, who we were with, what we heard and saw, how we felt. While I might rather forget, we can't escape how the events of that day have changed life for people — all over the world.

One of the sad and infuriating things about the wars this country is now engaged in is how they are so wrapped in religion. I suppose that should not surprise us since most wars appeal to our faith or lack thereof. Why else would we take the risks of war unless we felt that it was for a greater good, that God wanted us to, that God was on our side?

This war is more cloaked in religion than other wars the U.S. has been involved in the past half century. It is almost as if, as a country, we must defend God's honor. It makes me all the more grateful for the serendipitous gift of the lectionary texts on forgiveness today, especially the story from Genesis, which is part of the shared tradition of Muslims, Jews and Christians.

If there is anyone who deserves to be angry and to hold a grudge, to get violent, it is Joseph. His older brothers sell him into slavery and tell their father that he is dead. He subsequently becomes a servant and ends up in jail before rising to power in the pharaoh's palace.

The experience certainly has an impact. He names his first child Manasseh, which means “the one who lets us forget” because he said, “God let me forget all my former troubles and my former home.” The second child he names Ephraim, which means “fruitful” because Joseph said, “God made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.” (Gen 41:50-52)

Years later, his brothers come to Egypt seeking food in a time of famine and Joseph holds their fate in his hands. The temptation to make them grovel is strong. They do not recognize him, looking like an Egyptian. He allows them to beg and doesn't let on that he knows who they are. While he does give them the food they ask for, as they return home he makes them look like thieves. What a way to get even.

We read in Genesis of several more mean tricks that Joseph plays on his brothers until he reveals himself and is reunited with them. In this time of continuing famine, the brothers are invited to move their families to Egypt and the pharaoh sets them up to live comfortably. But the passage we read today lets us know that there is still fear and distrust in the relationship between Joseph and his brothers.

And why not, their father is Jacob the trickster after all. Remember how Jacob tricked his own father, Isaac, into giving him, the younger son, the blessing, instead of his older twin Esau? Jacob goes on to replay this with Joseph's sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Jacob gives the blessing that is rightfully for the older son Manasseh, to Ephraim, the younger son. As he blesses them, Jacob crosses his arms, switching the blessings. Joseph protests, but Jacob says that's how it will be. Is it any wonder that Joseph and his brothers continue to question if they can really trust their father or each other?

The passage we heard today is at the very end of the story. After Jacob dies, after the family travels back to the homeland to bury him there, after they all return to Egypt, the brothers are still not assured of their relationship with Joseph. They carry a lingering fear that Joseph might try to get back at them for what they did so many years before.

So they lie once more to Joseph. The brothers say, “On his deathbed, our father told us that you must forgive us for what we did to you. So we are asking you, forgive us for what we did to you, after all, we are faithful to our father’s God.”

When Joseph hears this, he breaks down weeping. Perhaps he weeps for his father, perhaps he weeps because he knows he does still carry fear and hatred in his heart. Or perhaps he weeps because he knows that after all these years his brothers have not really changed at all, they are lying — again. (The deathbed conversation as recorded in Genesis 48 is one that Jacob has not with the brothers, but with Joseph. Jacob says, “I am dying, but God will be with you, and bring you back to the land of your ancestors. I give to you one portion of land more than to your brothers.”)

Perhaps in this lie, Joseph feels sorry for his brothers. He sees how they still long for their father’s love, no matter that he is dead, no matter that they are fathers themselves, no matter how prideful they appear. Whatever the reason, Joseph weeps. And those tears release tears in the brothers themselves, and they all cry together. They finally find freedom as they begin to forgive.

More than a generation after he was thrown into the pit, left to die and sold into slavery, Joseph is able to forgive his brothers. He sees that although what they did was evil, something good actually developed. Somehow God worked with those hateful

actions and in the end it led to the salvation of the brothers and their families, of the whole family of Israel.

As if this story is not enough, today we are given also the gospel text where Jesus instructs the disciples on what forgiveness looks like. It is not adequate to forgive seven times, the number of wholeness, of completion. One must forgive 70 x 7. (An interesting coincidence: Jacob had 70 descendants as recorded in Genesis 46.)

While forgiveness in the Joseph story comes over a period of many years, in Matthew, forgiveness seems to be a result of self awareness, of seeing the similarities between oneself and a neighbor (or enemy). When we cannot see the continuity between our own need for forgiveness and the opportunity to forgive another, Jesus says, this is when we are in trouble.

We pray this in the prayer that Jesus taught, “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” How do we ever expect to be forgiven ourselves if we cannot forgive another? What closer corollary can there be to the great commandment “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Which of course does not mean it is easy to do, only that it is easier to remember.

As we remember that day 10 years ago and the ensuing weeks, months and now years of fear, violence and nationalism, what is our response?

What do you remember from Sept. 11 and how has that shaped your faith, how you live out your faith?

Does this story from Genesis of Joseph forgiving his brothers who tried to kill him have anything to say to us?

How do you hear Jesus’ parable of forgiveness?

I invite us into a time of silence, to remember and recall that day 10 years ago, to think about the scripture we have heard today. I will ring the bell to bring us into the silence and again to bring us out of the silence.

After the silence, you are invited to turn to two or three people near you and share your memories and thoughts on this day.

After this time of sharing, we will be called back together with the singing of “O Healing River.”