

PSALM 96

- 1 O sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
- 2 Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
- 3 Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples.
- 4 For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.
- 5 For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
- 6 Honor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
- 7 Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
- 8 Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.
- 9 Worship the Lord in holy splendor;
tremble before him, all the earth.
- 10 Say among the nations, 'The Lord is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity.'
- 11 Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
- 12 let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
- 13 before the Lord; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.

GENESIS 44-45

Then he commanded the steward of his house, 'Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man's money in the top of his sack. 2Put my cup, the silver cup, in the top of the sack of the youngest, with his money for the grain.' And he did as Joseph told him. 3As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away with their donkeys. 4When they had gone only a short distance from the city, Joseph said to his steward, 'Go, follow after the men; and when you

overtake them, say to them, “Why have you returned evil for good? Why have you stolen my silver cup? 5Is it not from this that my lord drinks? Does he not indeed use it for divination? You have done wrong in doing this.” ’

6 When he overtook them, he repeated these words to them. 7They said to him, ‘Why does my lord speak such words as these? Far be it from your servants that they should do such a thing! 8Look, the money that we found at the top of our sacks, we brought back to you from the land of Canaan; why then would we steal silver or gold from your lord’s house?9Should it be found with any one of your servants, let him die; moreover, the rest of us will become my lord’s slaves.’ 10He said, ‘Even so; in accordance with your words, let it be: he with whom it is found shall become my slave, but the rest of you shall go free.’ 11Then each one quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and each opened his sack. 12He searched, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest; and the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack. 13At this they tore their clothes. Then each one loaded his donkey, and they returned to the city.

14 Judah and his brothers came to Joseph’s house while he was still there; and they fell to the ground before him. 15Joseph said to them, ‘What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that one such as I can practice divination?’ 16And Judah said, ‘What can we say to my lord? What can we speak? How can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; here we are then, my lord’s slaves, both we and also the one in whose possession the cup has been found.’ 17But he said, ‘Far be it from me that I should do so! Only the one in whose possession the cup was found shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father.’

18 Then Judah stepped up to him and said, ‘O my lord, let your servant please speak a word in my lord’s ears, and do not be angry with your servant; for you are like Pharaoh himself. 19My lord asked his servants, saying, “Have you a father or a brother?” 20And we said to my lord, “We have a father, an old man, and a young brother, the child of his old age. His brother is dead; he alone is left of his mother’s children, and his father loves him.” 21Then you said to your servants, “Bring him down to me, so that I may set my eyes on him.” 22We said to my lord, “The boy cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.” 23Then you said to your servants, “Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall see my face no more.” 24When we went back to your servant my father we told him the words of my lord. 25And when our father said, “Go again, buy us a little food”, 26we said, “We cannot go down. Only if our youngest brother goes with us, will we go down; for we cannot see the man’s face unless our youngest brother is with us.” 27Then your servant my father said to us, “You know that my wife bore me two sons; 28one left me, and I said, Surely he has been torn to pieces; and I have never seen him since. 29If you take this one also from me, and harm comes to him, you will bring down my grey hairs in sorrow to Sheol.” 30Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy’s life, 31when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die; and your servants will bring down the grey hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. 32For your servant became surety for the boy to my father,

saying, "If I do not bring him back to you, then I will bear the blame in the sight of my father all my life." 33Now therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy; and let the boy go back with his brothers. 34For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father.'

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, 'Send everyone away from me.' So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.²And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. 3Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?' But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.' And they came closer. He said, 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. 9Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, "Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. 10You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. 11I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty."¹²And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. 13You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.' 14Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. 15And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

16 When the report was heard in Pharaoh's house, 'Joseph's brothers have come', Pharaoh and his servants were pleased. 17Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Say to your brothers, "Do this: load your animals and go back to the land of Canaan. 18Take your father and your households and come to me, so that I may give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you may enjoy the fat of the land." 19You are further charged to say, "Do this: take wagons from the land of Egypt for your little ones and for your wives, and bring your father, and come. 20Give no thought to your possessions, for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours."'

21 The sons of Israel did so. Joseph gave them wagons according to the instruction of Pharaoh, and he gave them provisions for the journey. 22To each one of them he gave a set of garments; but to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver and

five sets of garments. 23To his father he sent the following: ten donkeys loaded with the good things of Egypt, and ten female donkeys loaded with grain, bread, and provision for his father on the journey. 24Then he sent his brothers on their way, and as they were leaving he said to them, 'Do not quarrel along the way.'

25 So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. 26And they told him, 'Joseph is still alive! He is even ruler over all the land of Egypt.' He was stunned; he could not believe them.27But when they told him all the words of Joseph that he had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. 28Israel said, 'Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die.'

SERMON

This week I came upon two remarkable websites. The first is this incredibly handy little tool called "Thistothat.com." It's a website which offers advice about which adhesive to use for your various projects. You simply tell the website which items you'd like to stick together, say wood and metal, and it tells you which kind of glue you should use. It's fascinating and handy and has absolutely nothing to do with the story of Joseph.

But the second site has everything to do with Joseph, it's called The Forgiveness Project. It was started by a journalist back in 2004, in response to her years of reporting about how people dealt with all manner of life circumstances: happy, sad, or neutral. It came out just at the start of the war in Iraq, and she was seeking a place where people could tell stories of reacting to great loss or violence with restoration and healing, rather than revenge. Twelve years in, the site is filled with thousands of stories of people who chose to react to tremendous pain with forgiveness and peace. Stories from all around the world. An elderly man in Minnesota wrote about his experience as a young native American boy, taken from his family and placed in a boarding school set up by the Catholic Church to

teach Native children how to act and behave “white.” These schools are well known, many existed across the state of Michigan. Abuse and neglect were the rule, not the exception, in these schools, and thousands of families were destroyed. Native languages and cultures were lost. But this man, wrote about pursuing a higher education after running away, earning his PhD, and using this to build up, protect, and promote his native Ojibwa community. He didn’t lash out in anger, but instead sought to forgive and counteract the horrors experienced by his community.

Another man from Denmark wrote about the painful divorce he and his wife went through, his feelings of rage and hate toward the man his wife ended up marrying. And then, one Thanksgiving, knowing he would have to sit down to a family dinner with this man, as well as his ex wife and children, he decided to take him out to coffee first, to clear the air. The two men ended up becoming great friends, together working to raise the children in the family well, and when the new husband got cancer, the ex husband sat at his bedside with him as he died, saying goodbye to his friend and family member.

On the site you can read stories from the parents of children killed in the shooting at Sandyhook Elementary, stories of Prisoners of War from many conflicts throughout the 20th century, stories of people who were hurt by other individuals, stories of people who are caught in the chaos of war, stories of people who were hurt by the church... There’s a huge range of them, but what they all have in common is the thread of forgiveness. Of someone seeking to live out their life from a well of compassion and reconciliation, rather than anger and vengeance.

And as I read through them what I was struck by was the general quality of life I heard behind the words. Each story started with an act which would easily be understood to cause tremendous upheaval and turmoil. But by working from a well for forgiveness and grace, the people who were most healed were the victims of the violence themselves. The native man ended up finding his life's work and passion, rehabilitating his native community. The ex husband in Denmark found not only a friend, but created a safe space for this large, beautiful, extended and unexpected family unit to grow: children, separated parents, new step parents, and beyond. Again and again, forgiveness seemed to have an ability to heal the scars people carried inside themselves, and then so often this forgiveness seems to radiate outward, touching the people around them.

And this, the power of forgiveness to heal both individuals and communities, this is the real power of the Joseph story. All of the family drama, the false accusations, the dream interpretations, being sent to prison, sold into slavery, and even his promotion to Prince of Egypt...all of these ups and downs seems to exist, at least in my reading of this soap opera, to point us back to the power of forgiveness. Forgiveness is at the heart of this story. And we need to remember something about this story to see how powerful this act of forgiveness really is: now, it's important to remember something about Joseph and his family here. Joseph's dad, Jacob also went by the name Israel. And God had promised this man, Israel, that he would become the father of a great nation, of people so numerous they would outnumber the grains of sand. And we know that this did, in fact, happen. Those 12 sons of Jacob, they became the leaders of the 12 tribes of Israel. Their children and

grandchildren and great grandchildren, in time, became the ancient nation of Israel, led by leaders like King David and King Solomon. They were the ancient ancestors of Jesus and throughout time and space they were the chosen people of God.

But at this point, none of that has happened yet. It's just Jacob and his 12 sons.

Think about the tremendous power Joseph actually has here. What would have happened if he had simply thrown his 11 brothers into prison? Or had them killed? What if he had returned them evil for evil or even just punished them appropriately for their crimes? Would the people of God have ever come about? Would the nation of Israel have existed?

On one hand, it's tempting to say, yes! Of course it would have! God is so big and powerful, all things are possible. But think about this: the entire crux of the story for the people of Israel, their very beginnings, they're held in the hand of Joseph and his decision to punish or forgive.

We know the ending, so the suspense isn't exactly there for us, but all the same, the fact of the matter is that Joseph's forgiveness is a gift which echoes throughout the halls of the history of God's people. Our entire Old Testament would have been massively different without this choice.

In Jeremiah, the prophet tells the people of Israel: Everything works together for the good of those who love God and are called according to God's purposes. That's shown to be true again and again

throughout scripture. But it's not just that God is some puppet master in the sky, working things out. I think what we see in this story of Joseph is that part of this responsibility is on us. For God's good purposes to come to fruition, for God's kingdom to be known here on earth, we are called to live in the ways God asks of us: to love ourselves, to love our neighbors, to love God above all else. To be people who practice radical forgiveness, with the hope that it will bring about God's kingdom a little more clearly. To be people who choose to turn the other cheek, rather than strike back when we are hit. To embody gentleness, kindness, faithfulness, and love, even when it looks tremendously foolish by every measure of the world. As Jesus says, to forgive not once or twice, but to forgive seven times seventy times.

Like Joseph, or the man in Minnesota, or the ex-husband in Denmark, or like so many other stories of forgiveness, we are called to believe that the power of love is stronger than evil or hate or destruction. And that in choosing to forgive, we extend God's kingdom a little further here on Earth. So, thanks be to God for this story of Jacob and his twelve sons. Thanks be to God for the immense family dysfunction and the hilarious and unexpected comedy of this story. But most of all, thanks be to God for the faithfulness of Joseph, who chooses to forgive, in the face of overwhelming loss, and in that act brings about God's kingdom a bit more for each one of us. Thanks be to God.