

Forgiving is not easy
Sermon preached by Rev. Laurel Barr
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Genesis 45:1-15

Last week's *Australian Story* on the ABC television was heart wrenching. It was also the inspiring story of a remarkable grandmother. I don't know if any of you saw it. It told the tragic story of a family whose lives were dramatically changed by the death of a toddler in a caravan in Queensland. The little girl, whose name was Bianca was abused by her mother and her partner in a most horrific way. She was hog-tied - her feet and hands bound together. Bianca died as her parents ignored her cries. It's too much to imagine. Her brother, Christopher, two and a half years old, witnessed it all.

Bianca and Christopher were the children of a young woman with multiple psychological problems and her teenage boyfriend. Many times seeing the incapability of the young mother to properly care for her children, the young father's family wanted to take the children but they couldn't. Then the mother left with the children to go with another man.

Receiving the call about little Bianca's death, the teenage father's distraught family jumped on a plane to Brisbane. With the police's consent, they brought the little boy back to Melbourne away from the horror and they have cared for him ever since. The grandmother is now little Christopher's legal guardian.

But the damage goes on. For a long time the teenage father withdrew into himself unable to cope. His teenage sisters helped their mother but it has taken a huge toll on them. You see Christopher to this day - he is now nine years old - has never spoken a word since the time of his sister's death. He has shied away from people and showed destructive behavior. For a long while doctors did not know whether to treat him for trauma or for autism. He remains deeply disturbed needing a lot of love and constant attention.

Time has blunted some of the pain and brought some moments of tender hope but the unanswered questions, the grief for Bianca, the guilt of the grandmother and aunts for not acting earlier, and the anger have persisted. And now as the birth mother is released from gaol, there is a sharpened fear that she might turn up. This is a tragic story. You could say it is unforgivable.

The Biblical tradition is not removed from such scenarios. Joseph's family was also torn apart. In his case there was Jacob his foolish father who had a favourite son and bestowed upon him special favours. There was young Joseph's own precocious and conceited behaviour that provoked his older brothers. There was toxic sibling rivalry and simmering jealousy that one fateful day got out of hand. There was Reuben his oldest brother who failed to stand up and save him at the crucial moment.

Joseph's brothers severely stepped over the line. They cut him off from his home and family. They deprived their grieving father of his son. They deprived Joseph of his family and inheritance. When they sold Joseph off to be a slave they did not care if he would live or die. What the brothers did to Joseph could also be said to be unforgivable. In fact he spent the best years of his youth in servitude

and in prison before doing very well for himself. But over the years the wounds and guilt of what happened were never resolved and there was a terrible secret festering in his family.

The story of Joseph raises difficult questions. How do we forgive in situations where people have been abused, where the innocence of childhood is stolen and replaced by trauma and distrust? How do we forgive when someone we love is swept away from us; when we are badly let down or abused or deceived by someone we trusted; when our reputations are unfairly damaged, even ruined; when situations boil over and resentment cuts deep. How do we forgive when we are deeply hurt whether it is in our family home or our workplace or our community or in situations like those we witnessed this week in Georgia as people's homes were bombed and they were forced to flee?

As the memorable line in the film "Forest Gump" goes "*Sometimes there just aren't enough rocks*". Some times there are situations in which there are just not enough rocks to throw to express the deep emotions that well up inside us.

Getting to the point of even wanting to forgive is hard. It is easier to throw rocks. Tit for tat and revenge are the stuff that drives the plots of popular television soap night after night. To forgive is not our first instinct. It goes against our human nature and emotions.

The poet WH Auden* wrote
*"I and the public know
What all school children learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return"*

But Solzhenitsyn the great Russian novelist who died a few weeks ago and who survived the horror of the Soviet Russia's Siberian gulags said that what makes human beings different from the animal world is our ability to go against the instinct of nature and to repent and to forgive.*

The story of Joseph expresses all this. If we read the whole story when the brothers are forced to go to Egypt to find food in the drought and this brings them before Joseph whom they do not recognize, we witness Joseph really struggling with himself. Not once but several times we read that Joseph withdraws to weep and to collect himself during his negotiations with his brothers. At first he treats them quite roughly and we can well understand if he is angry and vengeful even bitter. We can well understand that unexpectedly finding himself face to face with his brothers after all those years, he needs time to work out what is happening to him and to understand what he should do.

And for the brothers' part not once but several times during those intervening years, they had interpreted their bad fortune to be God's judgment for the unspeakable secret that only they knew. They live in fear of being exposed. In the Genesis story we can read about them dealing with their shame and regrets. And in fact it is overhearing their remorse that first evokes Joseph's weeping. But as yet he cannot bring himself to forgive them.

And then finally when at last everything is revealed, we read that Joseph's sobs are heard not only in the room but by the Egyptians outside.

Forgiveness is not easy!

So what is forgiveness? Lewis Smedes in his book *The Art of Forgiving*** lists what forgiveness does not mean:

“Forgiving someone who has wronged us does not mean that we tolerate the wrong that was done.

Forgiving someone does not mean that we want to forget what happened.

Forgiving someone does not mean that we excuse the person who did it.

Forgiving does not mean that we take the edge off the evil done to us.

Forgiving does not mean that we surrender our right to justice.

Forgiving does not mean that we invite someone who hurt us once to hurt us again. “

But what is forgiving then? The Greek word most commonly translated as forgiveness means to release, to hurl away, to free yourself. Smedes says when we genuinely forgive, we set a prisoner free and then discover that the prisoner we set free is actually ourselves! *

In Sydney Garry Lynch, the father of Anita Cobby who was brutally raped and killed by a gang of remorseless youths surprised many people when he said that he forgave his daughter’s murderers. Many people just couldn’t understand it. In a recent interview Garry described how he still experiences piercing pain. He cannot forget and yet he knows he needs to forgive - otherwise he and his wife are even more the other victims of these murderers. You see Garry Lynch knows that if he harbours bitterness and hatred it is he who will be imprisoned in the past. Without forgiving he would lock out the possibility of being able to move forward in his life. And it is the same for us both in the big things and the small things that divide us and damage our lives.

And so it was for Joseph. When he forgave his brothers, his forgiveness spilled out in an avalanche of tears and groans. It was a tremendous letting go and it was also like the pangs of child birth. It allowed for a new beginning in the life of his family and broke the cycle of blame and guilt and shame and fear.

But then in the story Joseph says some astounding things to his brothers. He says “Do not upset or blame yourselves because you sold me here. It was really God who sent me ahead of you to save people’s lives... to rescue you in this amazing way to make sure that you and your descendants survive.”

I personally find these words almost too hard to swallow. Is Joseph letting them off the hook? Is he saying that God was pulling the strings all along? That all the suffering and hatred and grief was actually God’s will? That they bear no responsibility for their actions and the terrible consequences that followed?

I don’t think Joseph is saying that - but I do think that Joseph is able to forgive because he glimpses something much bigger at work. Joseph has an experience of God’s grace. He experiences God’s unconditional love working even in these events to give new life to his family and to fulfil God’s promises of blessing to his forebears, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Joseph is free to let go of his natural feelings that demand vengeance, and to forgive because even in this most difficult encounter with his brothers, God’s grace is present to heal and restore. Joseph who has experienced God’s sustaining strength right through the difficult years in Egypt is able to

trust God now to bring about God's justice. It's no longer up to him. And I believe that it is his entrusting of the situation into God's hands which sets him free and enables him and his family to be reconciled and to look to the future together with renewed hope.

Friends, "forgiveness is a journey into the grace of God"*** - the overflowing love of God which we see most clearly in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who said after being betrayed, denied, wrongfully accused, tortured and killed on a cross, "Father forgive them".

Forgiving is not a one-off act we just do. It was at the core of Jesus' whole life and for us it is a journey with God as we are caught up into God's overflowing grace for us all. God's grace embraces victims and perpetrators alike. It enfolds all of us for we all have shortcomings and imperfections and brokenness and it invites us into blessing and new beginnings and freedom. God's grace opens the door to that space where life is celebrated in all its wholeness.

I invite you to spend some time in quiet reflection:

What burdens of "unforgiveness" - of guilt, of shame, of regret, of cynicism, of outrage, of anger - are you carrying? Is there something you long to be released from? To be forgiven for by God - by someone else?

Is there a hurt and resentment that you cannot let go? Are you trying to forgive but are not able to? Do you want to begin a journey of healing and reconciliation today?

I invite you to close your eyes lightly and spend some quiet moments reflecting and praying - talking silently to God about these things

.....Now I invite you to hold your arms out in front of you your palms held upwards.

Receive the grace of God like cool rain on a hot day... receive God's mercy that soothes the painful places of our lives like warm balm on tired feet.... Receive the love that longs to release us from all that which binds us up and imprisons us in the past.

And if you are ready to begin the journey to forgiveness, let go of all the heavy burdens and hurts that you carry. Do it with deep thankfulness.

Jesus Christ, our gracious Lord, come and fill our lives that we may enter a new future where life is blessed and celebrated in all its fullness. Amen.

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*Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids Michigan USA 1997, pp. 84ff

**Lewis B. Smedes, *The Art of Forgiving*, 1996 Ballantine Books, found in *Seasons of the Spirit, Congregational Life*, Pentecost 1, p.127

***Keree Lousie Casey, "Surviving Abuse: shame, anger, forgiveness" in *Journal of Pastoral Psychology*, 46 (4 March), pp.223-231