

***“Together, the Courage to Forgive”***  
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, GA  
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, July 10, 2016  
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor  
**Holy Scriptures: Genesis 45: 1-15; Mark 11: 22-25**

Genesis 45:1-15 (NRSV) -- Joseph Reveals Himself to His Brothers

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.<sup>2</sup> And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. <sup>3</sup> Joseph 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. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. <sup>6</sup> For 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. <sup>7</sup> God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. <sup>8</sup> So 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. <sup>9</sup> Hurry 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. <sup>10</sup> You 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. <sup>11</sup> I 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.’ <sup>12</sup> And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. <sup>13</sup> You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” <sup>14</sup> Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. <sup>15</sup> And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Mark 11: 22-25

<sup>22</sup> Jesus answered them, “Have faith in God. <sup>23</sup> Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. <sup>24</sup> So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. <sup>25</sup> Whenever you stand praying,

forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.”

### Sermon

#### ***Together, the Courage to Forgive***

Today we prayerfully consider the story of interactions  
between Joseph with his estranged brothers Reuben, Simeon, Levi,  
Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin.  
According to the book of Genesis, these twelve brothers will become  
the patriarchs  
of the twelve tribes of Israel that bear their names.  
I say “will become,” because they must first learn the art of forgiving one  
another.

Listen once more to the Word from Genesis 45: 1-5:  
*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.  
And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it,  
and the household of Pharaoh heard it.  
Joseph 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.  
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.  
And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves,  
because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve  
life.”*

These words of Joseph, son of Jacob and Rachel, were spoken long ago and far away,  
yet they could have been uttered or shouted or whispered this week, this year  
in so many nations and cities, small towns and downtown streets.  
Joseph’s narrative has been told around campfires, in storybooks  
and on Broadway.

Joseph as a child is a bright and pesky little brother,  
a favored son, a wearer of a coat of many colors, an interpreter of dreams.  
He is unafraid to prophesy that one day his family will bow before him.  
He is content to learn and laugh and sing,  
while others sweat and swear vengeance,  
and seek to undo this pest of a brother.  
So one day the ten oldest sons do just that.  
They initially intend to kill Joseph  
however at the last moment change their minds and sell Joseph into slavery,  
a life sentence of servitude in far off Egypt.

“[Joseph] is sold [by his brothers] to Potiphar, the Pharaoh’s main guard. There, Joseph is falsely accused of rape by Potiphar’s wife and then put in prison, though he is innocent. Joseph eventually wins the favor of the Pharaoh and becomes his highest advisor.

After a major period of famine that Joseph has predicted, Joseph’s brothers arrive in Egypt to buy supplies they need. Remember, his brothers and family are not Egyptian.

They meet Joseph but do not recognize him because he is now much older than when they saw him last, and he speaks another language. He does not reveal himself to his brothers. Instead, he actually accuses them of being spies. To us, this part does not make it seem like he is moving toward forgiveness.

In the midst of all of these complexities, Joseph is discovering that his brothers have changed. They express remorse for what they did to Joseph. Instead of being willing to hurt each other, they have become brothers who are willing to sacrifice themselves for each other.” [1]

And now we return to the ageless, timeless conversation between Joseph and his brothers, a conversation of angst and anger and acknowledgement. Joseph aches to see his betrayers, his brothers, his once beloved before him:

*“Send everyone away from me.”*

Joseph weeps so loudly the household hears in his cries his anguish and frustration. Joseph identifies himself and then lays claim to his heritage; yet those who hear him are dismayed to discover that he even existed, to learn of his very presence in their lives.

Such is the broken state of their lives.

His brothers don’t recognize him and when they do they wish they didn’t. Then Joseph calls to his brothers:

*“Come closer to me.”*

Come closer to me;

draw nearer; let us look into one another’s eyes;

let us learn of each other’s gifts and growing edges, names and dreams;

let us set still a moment and breathe and be as one.

And they came closer.

Joseph said, *“I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.*

*And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here;*

*for God sent me before you to preserve life.” -- Genesis 45:*

1-5

Joseph, looking at his betrayers, his brothers, looks back over his life and sees God.

God was so close.  
God was present in the pain and grief;  
God wept and suffered in the brutality and violence;  
God was made known in the sustenance and strength;  
and God was present in the reconciliation.  
God was ready for reconciliation to take center stage,  
so that these twelve would be a foundation for the 12 Tribes of Israel,  
for generations and centuries to come.  
Thanks be to God, Joseph and his 11 brothers had all the tools  
necessary  
for peace and love and understanding.  
As Elvis Costello sang,  
*“What is so funny about peace and love and understanding?”*

### ***Together, the Courage to Forgive***

When God is nigh, so too is resurrection power.  
When Jesus Christ is at hand, so too is the presence of hope.  
When the Spirit is set free to work and play in the fields of the Lord, love always wins.

Out of grief comes new gain, a gift of God.  
Out of deep pain comes the balm of Gilead, a gift of Jesus Christ.  
Out of brokenness comes wholeness, a gift of healing from the Holy Spirit.

Distress and destruction shall not have the last word,  
for God wills for the preservation of life.  
Fragmented relationships shall not be the norm or the way it must be,  
for God fosters forgiveness and delivers grace upon grace.  
Isolation and helplessness and attitudes of I can't do this alone, I can't bear  
this alone,  
I can't, I can't... shall be overcome  
for God enters into the beloved community in our human context  
and joins our hands and says let's do this together.

### ***Together, the Courage to Forgive***

This past Thursday I was blessed to represent you and the Church  
at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Center  
for a gathering that had been planned months ago.  
Police Captains and Sheriffs from seven counties around the City of  
Atlanta  
sat in an auditorium with pastors, priests, imams, rabbis, and clerics  
from Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and Christian faith communities.  
We were 250 strong: it was standing room only.  
At least five of us were from the Christian Church (Disciples of  
Christ) tradition.  
Rev. Denise Bell, our regional minister, delivered an amazing benediction.

Our collective prayer and plan is to build relationships,  
specifically between each police precinct and each local congregation.  
Called One C.O.P. (One Congregation, One Precinct),

Atlanta is now a launch pad for what the Justice Department  
anticipates being a national model.  
Sheriffs and pastors received this together,  
agreeing it is a positive step toward  
fostering healthy and healing relationships in our urban context.  
God said, "Come closer to me, to one another."  
And we did, and God did.  
Draw nearer...  
Our congregation needs to know our local patrolman and  
patrolwoman;  
they need to know us.  
What a difference it would make if instead of hauling a youth off to jail  
the cop knew where she or he went to worship  
and brought the young person to his or her priest or pastor or rabbi.  
What a difference it would make if our local cop  
told us the hotspots and danger points to avoid  
and knew our names and needs and many ministries of grace.

880,000 American men and women  
have taken the oath to serve and protect us as police officers.  
Let's commit to get to know our own,  
and let us introduce ourselves to our civil servant.  
Let's see what kind of walls come tumbling down as we draw nearer...  
You know as well as I that some children in our land  
are taught to go to the police in times of trouble.  
Other children in our midst are taught to be wary, to avoid cops,  
to be subservient to police lest they be harmed or worse.  
Some are raised to want to grow up to be policemen or firemen;  
others are raised to duck and hide lest they be mistakenly, shamefully  
deported.

There is a time and place for activism,  
for raising awareness and consciousness and our voices.  
There is also a time and place for servant leadership,  
for dealing with and solving real problems.  
Let us be aware, awake, and a part of the solution.  
Let's invite the policemen who sit in the patrol car on our parking lot  
– and their families – to our next fellowship meal.  
Let's break bread **together, with the courage to forgive.**

The only change we can definitely make is in our self.  
One Congregation, One Precinct is a change, a start, a relationship  
we can do now, here, together.  
Let's start to heal the world one relationship at a time.

And while we are planning to make a change through our daring bodies,  
let's **together have the courage to forgive.**

One morning when Mrs. O'Flaherty went into the confessional booth  
she noticed an unfamiliar face behind the screen shutter.  
"You're not our regular priest," she said. "What are you doing here?"  
The man said, "Ma'am, I'm the custodian. Today I'm polishing the

furniture.”

“Well,” she said, “where is Father Dolan?”

“Ma’am, I couldn’t tell you,” he said, “but if Father Dolan heard anything like the stories I’ve been listening to, best bet is he has gone for the police.”

In his work called An African Prayer Book, Desmond Tutu tells of

“A [gentleman who] had a particular besetting sin,  
and he used to confess it and God would forgive him.

But no sooner had he been absolved then he would trip up and sin again.

One day this happened, and he rushed back to God and said,

‘I’m sorry, I’ve done it again.’

And God said, ‘What have you done again?’”

“God,” writes Desmond Tutu, “suffers from amnesia when it comes to our sins.

God does not look at the caterpillar we are now,  
but at the dazzling butterfly we have in us to become.

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus bids us to ask God to forgive us  
as we forgive those who have wronged us.

Not to forgive others is to shut the door to our own being forgiven.” [2]

Jesus said to His followers,

*“So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer,*

*believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*

*Whenever you stand praying, forgive,*

*if you have anything against anyone;*

*so that your [Creator] in heaven*

*may also forgive you your trespasses.” -- Mark 11: 24-25*

Let’s be real here.

Practicing the art of forgiveness is not saying the offense never happened.

It did.

Forgiveness is not saying that everything is okay.

It isn’t.

Forgiveness is not saying that we never feel the pain of being wronged.

We do.

Forgiveness is an attitude; it is a way to approach life;  
it is our greatest challenge and our mightiest joy in the practice of our faith.

Anne Lamott said:

*“I am not one of those Christians who are heavy into forgiveness. I am the other kind.”*

### ***Together, the Courage to Forgive***

Twenty years ago, back in 1995 and ‘96,

a large number of churches across the South and Southwest  
were burned to the ground

including a disproportionate amount of church buildings

that housed primarily African-American congregations.  
At the time my family worshiped God  
in Bethany Christian Church in Jackson, Tennessee.  
Our congregation rallied to the cause:  
we worshiped alongside one such congregation  
and helped rebuild their humble church home.  
Week of Compassion dollars helped raise necessary funds.  
At the time Rev. Johnny Wray was the Director of Week of  
Compassion.

At the city-wide ceremony to celebrate the rebuilt sanctuary,  
we invited Johnny Wray to go with us and participate.  
Before the service Johnny was speaking with a group of children,  
and he asked them if the people  
who had burned down their original building had been caught.  
An eleven-year-old girl looked Johnny in the eye and said,

*"I don't know if the arsonists have been caught,  
but I do know that we prayed for them  
and that we already forgave them."*

My friends, I shared that same story,  
the one about the forgiving love of a child and her church,  
at the Decatur Rotary fifteen years ago,  
and recently a Rotarian came up to me and,  
with a choked voice and tears in his eyes,  
repeated the true story *word for word*.

God said, "Come closer to me, to one another."  
And we did, and God did.  
Draw nearer...  
The world is looking for a sign of hope.  
That child of eleven is now around 31.  
Is she still believing, practicing, trusting in the power of  
forgiveness?  
We can only hope.  
Our neighbors crave Good News in the midst of the horrors  
and hurt and hate.  
Our cities march and tweet, sing and shout, pray and  
preach for peace,  
for brotherhood and sisterhood,  
for an end to the violence and a fresh start,  
a rebuilt communal spirit  
and healing in our hearts and homes and lands.

### ***Together, the Courage to Forgive***

Clint Eastwood directed and acted in a film called *Unforgiven*.  
The Western movie depicts one act of violence tumbling into another,  
each one increasing in its brutality and infliction of pain.  
Very tough to behold.  
Yet there is a pause after each horrific act.  
There is time, a moment, a pause for one character or another

to say, "I am sorry." Or for another to offer, "I forgive you."  
If any one character would express himself or herself thusly,  
the violence would have ended. End of story.  
Or, even better, the story would have turned a fresh, new corner,  
as peace rules the plains.  
We've tried violence as a means to an end.  
How is that working for you?  
We've given racism and sexism and homophobia full reign as a means to an

end.

How is that working for us?  
Maybe it is time we put our egos aside and give God a shot at the title.  
Maybe, possibly, finally we at long last are "sick and tired of being sick and

tired,"

as Fannie Lou Hamer said some 50 years ago,  
and now we are ready to let go and let God take the point.

Thanks be to God, like Joseph and his 11 brothers, we have all the  
tools necessary  
right here and now for peace and love and understanding.

God has generously given to you a soul,  
and in that soul is the strength to cope with whatever life tosses your way.  
We need to draw deep upon that God-given strength and courage  
to admit our errors, our individual and collective sins, if you will,  
to acknowledge our interdependency,  
and to confess the wrongs we have done to one another.  
We will be so amazed to discover that God is using us to  
preserve life,  
to launch from our rebuilt relationships new tribes  
to heal the world.

### ***Together, the Courage to Forgive***

Joseph and his 11 brothers, Desmond Tutu, the Lord's Prayer, the Holy Scriptures,  
and your own beautiful faith point you toward  
the incredible, amazing truth that God forgives  
-- and forgets -- our repented sins.  
When it comes to our confessed sins,  
the amnesia of God is a spiritual attribute  
we are encouraged to claim...and emulate.  
The Good News is that God covenants with us  
to not hold our confessed sins against us.  
Accepting this as a starting point is the easy part.  
Here is the hard part, my friends.  
Here is the part that makes us uncomfortable and afflicts our consciences:  
As God has forgiven us,  
so we are to grant forgiveness to one another.

Where there is forgiveness, there is life.  
If Jesus does not forgive us from the Cross, there is no resurrection.  
If we do not forgive one another, there can be no resurrection,



no renewal, no reconciliation in our relationships.  
It takes a great deal of courage to look someone in the eyes  
and say you are sorry.  
Jesus will give you all the courage you need,  
and will be there when you do, and if you like, we will, too.  
It takes just as much courage to look someone in the eyes  
and say you are forgiven.  
Jesus will give you all the courage you need,  
and will be there when you do, and if you like, we will, too.

Thanks be to God,  
the people gifted to this blue planet spinning in the sky  
have all the tools necessary for peace and love and understanding.

God is ready for reconciliation to take center stage,  
so that this people shall be a foundation for the beloved community  
for generations and centuries to come.

The next steps are up to us.  
God said, "Come closer to me, to one another."

Draw nearer...

Draw closer...

*All power to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

[1] [Fearless Faith: Courage in Community](#) By: Erin Reed Cooper, Editor. InsideOut: Christian Resources for Outdoor Ministries; Copyright © 2015 by Chalice Press. Produced for and outlines developed by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC) Committee on Outdoor Ministries (COM). Page 20.

[2] Desmond Tutu, [An African Prayer Book](#), 1995, P.38.