

Youth Sunday Sermon: Forgiveness
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So this week in Youth Sunday we're talking about Family Feuds. I live in a house with three boys, me and my two brothers. A fight can break out over the last piece of food at dinner. However, these issues always seem to resolve themselves when later one of us will poke our head through the other's door and say "Yo dude im going to go get something do you want any?" But let's talk about the Bible, because our favorite old testament families never had it as easy as tossing a bag of chips into your brother's room.

You know, Joseph had it pretty easy being the youngest. He learned math instead of working in the field, his parents always gave him his way, and he had one extremely awesome coat. And just like the families of today, the older brothers resented the youngest for the special treatment he received. I don't know if any of you in the congregation have little siblings, but man, sometimes it sucks.

So the brothers make Joseph's life terrible. They tear off his coat and sell him to slave traders. They cover the coat in animal blood and tell their father that Joseph was mauled by an animal. Joseph is sold to the captain of the guard in Egypt, where, after a brief stint in prison, he redeems himself by interpreting a dream that the pharaoh had about 7 bad years of famine to come. The brothers experience he famine too, and they go to Egypt for aid. When his brothers return to ask for food, they don't recognize him. He contemplates getting his revenge on them, and almost does.

But instead he reveals himself, embraces his brothers and send them on their way. Reading through the new testament, I lingered on 1 John 2:10, which reads "whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and will not stumble. I realized that this story of joseph is not about hate, or revenge, or even betrayal. It's about love. Joseph was able to love his brothers, even though they betrayed him, and forced him into many hardships. Despite all of this, he chose to reveal himself to them and embrace them.

Though the feud between the sons of Jacob may have lasted longer than the average brotherly fight, it teaches us the same lesson in the end. Family is what is most important, and at the end of the day, it's all you've really got. As I'm preparing to leave for college in the next few months, I'm starting to realize this more and more. Leaving my brothers, who have been a constant in my life for all my childhood years will be one of the hardest things I've had to do. It's funny, how we as teenagers don't seem to appreciate family until we're about to leave. These days, FaceTime makes it a bit easier, but nothing replaces that everyday connection. Learning to value family is one of the most important lessons we can be taught, and I think Joseph teaches it pretty well.

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On April 6th, 1994, an airplane carrying the Rwandan president Juvénal Habyarimana was shot down above the Rwandan presidential palace, effectively terminating a brief period of peace in the midst of a civil war. The following day, checkpoints and barricades were set up requiring Rwandan citizens to show their national ID cards in order to pass through safely. Because the ID cards contained ethnic classifications, these checkpoints enabled the government to systematically target Tutsi citizens, initiating a brutal 100-day genocide in which 70% of the Tutsi population, numbering between ½ a million and a million people, was murdered by its Hutu neighbors.

One woman, interviewed and photographed by Brandon Stanton of the Humans of New York blog, lost her entire family -- 11 people, including her two-year-old brother -- in those 100 days. A young girl at the time, she was the only one to escape when the soldiers came, by climbing out the window of their house and hiding overnight in a tree. In the morning, she awoke to find she had been discovered by a soldier. "He pointed his gun at me," she said, "and told me to say goodbye to my life. At that point I felt ready to die." But a woman named Mary -- Mary, the *same name* as the mother of Jesus -- ran out of her house, fell at the soldier's feet, and pled, "Leave this girl for me. You've killed her entire family. Just leave this one for me. God sent her to me." And miraculously, the soldier left. Mary took care of the girl for the rest of those 100 days.

Months after the genocide, a new Tutsi-run government was officially formed. Tutsis and Hutus were encouraged to seek reconciliation and to find ways to forgive. But for many, forgiveness seemed impossible. As the woman said in her interview with Stanton: "How can I possibly forgive on behalf of those who can no longer speak for themselves?"

Forgiveness in the story of Joseph, like in Rwanda, is not immediate. When Joseph's brothers come to Egypt, Joseph accuses them of being spies, puts them in jail for three days, then threatens them, saying that if they are truly honest men, they will go home and bring their youngest brother Benjamin back to him. When Joseph sees Benjamin upon their return, he runs out of the room and begins to weep, so overcome by his affection for his brother. And yet, even after surrendering to his emotions, Joseph tricks his brothers by hiding his silver cup in Benjamin's sack, accusing them of stealing one of his most prized possessions. It's only after Judah pleads with Joseph to let Benjamin go -- for his father's sake -- that Joseph finally reveals who he truly is, and forgives his brothers.

But Joseph is in a vastly different position than he was when his brothers last saw him. He's no longer a teenage slave but a powerful man in his thirties with a wife and two sons, a person *so different* from the one his brothers once knew that they don't recognize him until Joseph tells them who he is. Joseph's sale into slavery, which his brothers thought would bring him the justice he deserved, turns out to afford him a huge amount of power. In Egypt, Joseph becomes a prosperous man; God was with him in everything that he did, so that despite being coveted and tricked by his master's wife, and eventually put into jail,

Joseph becomes an expert interpreter of dreams and rises to be the Pharaoh's "right-hand man."

So I'm not sure the forgiveness Joseph offers his brothers is a true forgiveness. He doesn't actually say the word "forgiveness" once in the entirety of the passage. He simply says, "do not be distressed or angry with yourselves." His tone is demanding and insistent. It's a kind of "power play" for Joseph to prove to them that he is now the one in charge, and no longer the helpless younger brother. Even in offering his forgiveness, he wants his brothers to understand the depth of his power. In this story, there's no conversation: Joseph simply tells his brothers, "Don't be angry or distressed!"

The problem with the kind of reconciliation that we see in the story of Joseph is that true forgiveness is simply not that easy: forgiveness is a process, full of twists and turns and ups and downs, that involves both the victim and the oppressor.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in her Ted Talk, "The Danger Of a Single Story," describes the danger in reducing a person or a situation to a single narrative. These "single stories" appear all around us: in the polarized nature of politics, where both sides are so convinced that they are right that they refuse to talk to each other, reducing the true problems in our country to a single story; or in the ways that Africans are too often lumped into a single category -- that of a starving and helpless people -- despite being a vast and varied people. The danger with stereotypes, Adichie says, "is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."

When conversation is not a part of our process of forgiveness, we are left with a single story: Hutus become *only* The Perpetrators Of The Rwandan Genocide, and Joseph's brothers become *only* Those Who Sold Their Brother Into Slavery. It's not that these things are untrue: it's just that they aren't the whole story. Pushing these narratives challenges us, opens our perspectives, and more often than not, paves the way to forgiveness.

Now a mother, the Rwandan woman has found two Hutu elders to mentor her son. She wants him to see that "Hutus have good hearts." She's spending time with Hutu people, broadening her story of Hutu people to be more than just the genocide. True forgiveness, she says, still seems impossible. But by being in conversation with people, each day the door opens a little bit wider.

Think about an incident in your own life that caused your perception of someone to be reduced to a single story. How could you begin to broaden that narrative, beginning with conversation? How could your perspective change and shift? Where in your own life could you be the one to wedge open the door to forgiveness?