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# “FREE RENT?”

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Genesis 45:1-15, Matthew 18:12-21



AUGUST 17, 2014  
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October, 2006, reporters from all over the world descended upon the peaceful hamlet of Nickel Mines, in the heart of rural Lancaster county PA, after the tragic shooting of 10 young girls – 5 of whom were killed -- in a one-room Amish school. In the hours and days following the shooting, a completely different and surprising story began to develop.

The afternoon of the shooting and Amish grandfather of one of the girls who was killed expressed forgiveness toward the killer, Charles Roberts. That same day Amish neighbors visited the Roberts family to comfort them in their sorrow and pain. Later that week the Roberts family was invited to the funeral of one of the Amish girls who had been killed. And Amish mourners outnumbered the non-Amish at Charles Roberts' funeral

It's ironic, isn't it, that the killer was tormented for nine years by the premature death of his young daughter. He never forgave God for her death, but after he shot 10 innocent Amish schoolgirls in cold blood, the Amish community almost immediately forgave him and showed compassion toward his family.

In the midst of their grief over this shocking and senseless loss, the Amish community didn't cast blame or point fingers; they didn't hold a press conference with attorneys at their sides. Instead, they reached out with grace and compassion toward the killer's family. In a world like ours, always pointing fingers, blaming others, this reaction was unheard of. Many reporters and other people following the story asked, "How could they forgive such a terrible and unprovoked act of violence against innocent lives?"

It's quite simple really -- not easy, but simple: The Amish culture follows the teachings of Jesus Christ, who taught us to forgive each other; who taught us to place the needs of others before our own, and to rest in the certainty that God is still in control and can bring good out of any situation. Life's theme is love and compassion toward others. Pretty simple, huh?

The Nickel Mines School was torn down and a new school was built in a different location. They called it New Hope School.

How easy it would have been to start gathering up lawyers and suing the family of the killer. How easy it would have been to do as the killer did – to hold a grudge against him and his family – even though he took his own life that day.

But what good would that do? And I mean what good would it do? Because aren't we supposed to be all about doing good? (I say that like it's easy)

And wouldn't it have been easy for Joseph to carry the burden of what his brothers did to him all those years before? In fact, I think he did. If Joseph is anything like me, he held on to

every detail of the torment that his brothers put him through. I know that as the 'new kid' in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, I can remember every mean comment, every cruel prank, like it happened yesterday.

How do we let this stuff go? How did Joseph? Because I don't think Joseph even started the healing process until he saw his brothers again, the first time they visited Egypt after the famine took hold of the land.

Look how long it took him to get to the forgiveness part. In Genesis 42 they join up with a parade of victims from a great famine in the Near East. Egypt was always the 'go-to' place to buy grain because the Nile, with its glorious regularity, rose and fell without fail, effectively irrigating Egypt's crops along the entire length of the river.

In the time that Joseph has been away, some remarkable things happened to him after his brothers beat him up, stripped him, threw him in a well and sold him into slavery! Due to his skill at interpreting dreams and, surprisingly, his humility in giving God all the credit for it, Joseph has become something like the governor of the land, or thinking about his duties, he was like the secretary of agriculture, I guess. Anyway, he's clearly a part of Pharaoh's inner circle. After all, he's got all the bling – the rings the chains, the bracelets – Pharaoh's own signet ring, given to him by the big man himself! Joseph is the most important and powerful man in all of Egypt, other than Pharaoh himself.

You have to kind of feel for the brothers a little bit. Here come the lying, murderous brothers, hungry and feeling that feeling you get when you have to ask somebody else for help, you know? They don't recognize their little tattle-tale brother. He speaks Egyptian and uses an interpreter to translate, but you have to know that he certainly recognizes them.

The brothers expect to simply buy some grain at a fair price, but what they get is far from simple. "Where do you come from?" Joseph asks them. All of the torment and the name-calling has come flooding back to Joseph – and the dreams! Didn't he have a dream just like this where his brothers were bowing down to him? He accuses them of being spies and starts his nasty game of revenge that lasts all the way to his revelation in today's reading, 3 chapters and two years later. He plants money in one of their grain sacks, and when they discover it, they have to go back, and Joseph accuses them of theft! Meanwhile, Joseph hears them talking about Jacob's new favorite, Benjamin. If they want to come and get more grain, he tells them, they will have to bring Benjamin with them, which they do. He then plants his special silver goblet in Benjamin's grain sack; they again have to return to Egypt, probably expecting to be thrown in jail or worse at the hands of this angry Egyptian tyrant. Joseph accuses them again, and but he just can't take it anymore, and he reveals his true identity.

Can you imagine? This is the worst news they could hear! It was bad enough to be standing in front of a powerful Egyptian governor who had a fit over a lost cup, but to come to the realization that this is their lost brother? After all they had done to him?

There's no doubt in my mind that Joseph has been holding a grudge – one could understand if he has just a little chip on his shoulder over the fact that his older brothers tried to kill him, but changed their minds when they thought they could make a shekel or two ....

Fear and guilt written on their faces, they fell silent. What could they possibly say? Before, they at least could hope that the angry Egyptian would be impartial. But now? They're doomed – this is Joseph's chance for revenge. You know what they say about paybacks....

But he's had a change of heart. Something that Joseph needed to know has been satisfied. He has seen evidence of repentance – which is different from being sorry. We don't know if the brothers were sorry or had regrets, but they are genuinely concerned for the health of their father and their little brother Ben.

By the way, this is not the best way to forgive somebody. Do NOT wait until you see signs of repentance.

I have to wonder though. I can't help but wonder if Joseph ever contemplated his own role in the harm that was done to him. There's two sides to every coin, as they say, and Joseph wasn't totally innocent in all this.

Maybe Joseph owes the brothers an apology. Maybe the brothers will get an opportunity to forgive Joseph but at the moment they're completely speechless. The brothers don't - or can't - say a word after Joseph's tells them who he is. "...so dismayed were they at his presence," that they don't say anything until after Joseph demonstrates his forgiveness the end of the scene, and even then we are not told what they talk about.

I was talking to someone yesterday about forgiving somebody and they told me a story about forgiving a brother after many years of holding a grudge. The story of the Amish came up and she said that was when she decided that if the Amish could forgive the murderer, then whatever her brother had done seemed rather small. And so she forgave him. And her description of the relief that she felt – "like the whole desk had been lifted off my shoulders...."

Imagine the weight lifted from Joseph's and his brothers' shoulders...

They say that holding a grudge is like letting someone live in your head rent-free. It's a joy-burglar that we allow to steal any happiness we may have out of our lives. It's an open

wound in need of healing and we would never just let a wound go untreated to get infected -- or worse -- would we?

True forgiveness is a process, not a destination. Sometimes it takes practice. Jesus touches on this in our Gospel reading Matthew 18 – “How many times must I forgive?” 7 x 70. Over and over, because forgiving isn’t for the benefit of the person being forgiven. It doesn’t heal the wrongdoer, it heals the forgiver.

The only forgiveness I can muster sometimes is a prayer: “Dear God – please forgive them, because I sure as heck can’t!”

Sometimes what's been done to you is unforgivable. Terrible things are part of this world. People are raped. People experience the murder of a loved one. Holocausts, both personal and national do happen. We don't have to forgive everything or everybody. But we still don't want to be stuck in that wound and have it define your entire future. Maybe the best you can do is grieve the fact that this terrible event touched your life. Maybe you have to wrestle with this issue with God, Himself. That is up to you.

There is so much more to say about forgiveness. It can heal us – our wounds – but it’s not easy. If we have hurt others, making amends and working on ourselves is important. If we have been hurt, make every effort to grieve the loss of innocence or time or pride - forgive in whatever way you can - and move forward. The future is yours.

In the end, our lives are about the stories we live and tell ourselves. Forgiveness is a story about putting the past in the past, where it belongs.

In closing I’ll leave you with the thought for the week from MLK Jr., which is so perfect for this topic: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. -- Martin Luther King, Jr.