

Journey with me into biblical history, back almost four thousand years, to the days of the Hebrew Patriarch Jacob and his twelve sons. From Abraham, through Isaac, and then Jacob, there was one Hebrew Patriarch in each generation. But Jacob had *twelve* sons. These twelve sons represent the diversifying of God's people into many tribes – and with diversity comes conflict.

My own brothers, like Joseph's, couldn't be more different from me. Sometimes things got pretty rough among us (and of course as the youngest and most sensitive – and innocent! – I was terribly mistreated! ☺). But I have to say, my brothers never sold me into slavery, as Joseph's did. Because Joseph's brothers despised Joseph for being the favorite of their father, and for his arrogant dreams, this band of brothers did the unthinkable: they sold their own flesh and blood into slavery in Egypt.

Years later, their betrayal comes home to roost. (This is pretty typical of biblical tales.) There is famine in the land, and Jacob and his sons are feeling the pinch. They go to Egypt, where there was still food – not knowing that their little brother Joseph was now governor there. The brothers didn't recognize Joseph, but he knew them. He messed with them a while in some nasty ways – Joseph was no paragon of virtue. But then something happened. Joseph could bear his own deception no longer. He said to his brothers, “**I am Joseph.**” Imagine their fear when they realized who he was! Yet they did not need to be afraid. The powerful governor Joseph, longing for the family he had lost, exercised his *greatest power of all – the power to forgive*. “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, *God intended it for good*.... I myself will provide for you and your little ones.”

It is one of the grandest moments in Scripture. After the most despicable things had occurred, after the worst kind of sin had been committed, forgiveness and mercy change everything. A family is

reunited, hunger is replaced by plenty, and Old Man Jacob lived his last days in joy and peace. Again, the wise words of the Bard come to mind:

The quality of mercy is not strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: it blesseth him that gives and him that takes.”

Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice

So how does this marvelous story help us understand human evil in our own day – the terrible things people do to each other? How does it lead us from the place of anger and hatred, to the place of mercy and forgiveness?

I know what it's like to get stuck in that place of hurt, anger, and bitterness. While I've never suffered any truly terrible hurt, never been abused or deprived as many are, I have known that feeling of injury and righteous indignation, and clung to it like a prize possession. But the only purpose that feeling can fulfill is to keep us stuck and alienated from our family or friends, or even from life itself. As long as I have held onto my resentment, I have punished myself as well as other people. I have built myself a prison cell to keep me apart from the people God has given me to love. Why have I done this? I really don't know. But when I finally forgive, and receive forgiveness, nothing is sweeter than reconciliation, and I thank God for that.

Now in a new century, I wonder if we Americans, so grievously injured on 9/11, can find it in our hearts – as Joseph did after his injury – to show mercy, to find forgiveness. I wonder if we'll ever come to see all the diverse peoples of this world as our brothers – all so different, yes – but brothers still. Can we imagine those twelve sons of Jacob, fanning out across the globe, becoming many peoples and nations – yet all God's children still?

We have been seduced by this world into thinking that evil, hatred, and violence are the strongest powers at work in the world. And, yes, they are powerful forces, wreaking much havoc all around us. Yet this story of Joseph and his brothers shows us the greater power of forgiveness, the blessed quality of mercy, the disarming power of love.

And we see this even more clearly in the life and teachings of Jesus. We see Jesus take evil and hatred and violence into himself, into his own body, even unto death. And then we see the greatest power of all: the power of forgiveness and mercy, the power of resurrection and new life, the power of God's fierce love for every one of us.

So we must never lose hope, never give up on God's mighty power in our own lives, and in the world around us. Let us pray together, this day and every day, for peace on earth, and peace in our own hearts. Lord, make us instruments of your peace. AMEN.