

Epiphany 7, Year C  
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St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

Anyone here ever get into an ugly spat with a sibling?  
I'm going out on a limb here and say that  
the only people never to be wounded by a brother or sister  
are those who are only children.  
Otherwise, sibling rivalry is pretty much a foregone conclusion.  
If we're lucky, those spats last only a little while,  
and then are forgotten, and we move on.  
Others have been carrying the tragedy of estrangement from family  
members  
for years or even decades.

But I'm also betting that no one here this morning,  
no matter how rotten or unlikeable or despicable  
your brother or sister is,  
has anything LIKE the family dysfunction of poor Joseph,  
in our Old Testament lesson this morning.

Of course this morning's dramatic account of reunion and reconciliation  
comes near the end of the greater story.  
This scene follows stories of Joseph growing up,  
being a real jerk to his older brothers,  
flaunting the fact that dad always loved him best,  
and those older brothers turning around and selling him into slavery.  
But Joseph didn't stay a slave.  
He went on to become a dream interpreter for Pharaoh,  
and then to be put in charge of overseeing all of Egypt.

You know what they say:  
Living well is the best revenge.  
But is it? Really?  
His brothers SOLD HIM INTO SLAVERY!!!!  
What kind of brothers do that to a family member?  
Even the most annoying little brothers  
don't deserve a fate like that.

One can well imagine how many nights  
Joseph spent plotting a whole lot of revenge scenarios.  
I know I would have.

But now, in one of Scripture's most poignant narrative moments,  
Joseph at last confronts his brothers,  
who have no idea that this man who now runs Egypt,  
and who holds their very lives in his hands,  
is, in fact, their arrogant, bratty little brother,  
who they sold into slavery!  
Oops!

Only, the thing is, Joseph isn't a brat anymore.  
He's not arrogant anymore.  
Rather than taking revenge on them,  
Joseph comforts his speechless brothers.  
"Don't be distressed or angry with yourselves  
because you sold me here," he says.  
"For God sent me before you to preserve life."  
Joseph forgives his brothers their vicious betrayal,  
and secures their family's future,  
and invites them to move to Egypt and live at his expense.  
By responding so faithfully  
and so non-reactively  
to his brothers' treachery,  
Joseph rescues his family  
from a famine that surely would have killed them.

What an incredibly gracious picture of forgiveness.  
But forgiveness is not something that comes easily or readily to many of us.  
There certainly isn't a whole lot of it in the world today, is there?

For example, have you ever gone into a store  
that had very pretty but very delicate merchandise?  
Sometimes they have a sign up that says  
"If you break it, you pay for it."

That's the sign a lot of us put up in the stores of our lives.  
We more or less hang up signs that say  
*"I'm fragile, I'm delicate, I'm sensitive, I'm proud, I'm stubborn."*

*I'm wounded. I'm hurt.*

*If you break a part of me – you're going to pay for it."*

Don't we all know people like that,  
people who are anxious to embrace victimhood,  
and make us pay and pay and pay  
for our little missteps, intended or otherwise.

That's just the way much of the world is.

The sign of the world says, *"If you break it, you pay for it."*

But you know, it doesn't HAVE to be that way.

Recently I was in a little gift shop

that was filled with hundreds of extremely fragile items.

I was admiring their Dickens Christmas Village.

I have long coveted having such a beautiful Christmas display myself,

and I was trying to absorb all the details of theirs

without actually touching any of the pieces,

because I know what those pieces cost.

That's why I don't have my own Dickens Village!

The clerk saw me and said,

*"Go ahead the pick it up. Don't worry about it."*

And then she pointed to a sign on the wall.

It said, *"If you break it, please tell us so we can forgive you."*

I was delighted. And I automatically breathed a little bit easier.

But I wondered how they could afford to be that generous.

She told me that since they had put up the sign,

the amount of breakage really hadn't changed,

but it just made everybody feel more comfortable.

People didn't feel so much like they were walking on egg shells.

There's something about knowing that you'll be forgiven for a mistake

that frees you to relax and enjoy.

That's the story of the forgiveness and love of God,

as modeled for us in this story of Joseph and his brothers.

God has put up a huge sign that says

*"If you break it, please tell me so I can forgive you."*

So that's one way we can enter into this story of Joseph and his brothers.

We can relate to the brothers

who know what they did was wrong,  
 but who nevertheless were granted forgiveness  
 that they did nothing to earn.  
 Each of us stands before God as miserable sinners,  
 knowing that we deserve to be punished,  
 but finding that somehow, miraculously, we have been forgiven,  
 and we are invited to come and live at God's place, free of charge.

But there's another way we can also enter into this story.  
 We are also Joseph in this story.  
 Not that many of us will ever be gazillionaires,  
 placed in charge of a whole country.  
 But I bet every one of us here  
 can share in Joseph's sense of having been wronged.  
 Haven't all of us, at some point in our lives, been unjustly treated?  
 And haven't we all been in situations  
 where we secretly plotted our revenge?

More than occasionally, the Josephs of the world  
 use their newfound power to pay back  
 those who wronged them on the way up.  
 We see things like this happen all the time.  
 It's the basis of many a TV show plotline.

Imagine that Joseph had responded that way.  
 He could have felt justified in selling his brothers into slavery themselves.  
 Or he could have sent them away to starve in the famine.

But, you see, if Joseph's brothers – Jacob's sons – don't survive,  
 then God's promise to Abraham fails.  
 Remember the family tree here:  
 Joseph is the son of Jacob, who is the son of Isaac, who is the son of  
 Abraham.

This moment of reconciliation  
 between Joseph and his brothers  
 is absolutely crucial  
 to the larger movement of God  
 through Genesis and Exodus and beyond.  
 And it never could have happened

if Joseph hadn't forgiven his brothers.

I think that this is where Joseph's story can become our story.  
 Because no matter how different our reality  
 is from Joseph's reality,  
 God's reconciling movement in the world  
 still and *always will* hinge on forgiveness.

This dramatic moment from the 45<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis  
 gets played out again and again  
 every time someone is wronged.  
 A wife forgives her husband.  
 A friend forgives a friend.  
 An enemy forgives an enemy.

Reconciliation breaks out in these moments,  
 and suddenly the position of the victim has radically changed.  
 In the moment of forgiveness,  
 the wronged one is transformed  
 from victim - who hangs up a sign saying  
 "Break a part of me and you'll pay for it" –  
 into a co-creator with God of a new world.  
 A world that says  
 "Things that have been broken can be made new.  
 Let's work on doing that together."

Jesus asks all his followers  
 to forgive in order to be forgiven.  
 And he says that we should love everyone.  
 Not just those who are easy to love,  
 but especially those who are hardest to love.  
 Sometimes those are our enemies,  
 but more often it's hardest to love those  
 who annoy us daily,  
 ignore us often,  
 or disagree with us on big life issues.  
 Jesus teaches us that we must love those people,  
 love them,  
 forgive them,  
 "Do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return."

Jesus doesn't ask us to love so that we will be loved.  
Jesus tells us to love  
because we ARE loved,  
by God, forever.  
And we are forgiven.  
No matter how much we behave like bratty jerks.

So here is my challenge to you.  
This week, find one person who annoys you,  
and try to show them – with God's help –  
the love of Christ,  
extending them an extra dose of patience.  
See what you can do to be reconciled  
with someone who has done you wrong.

You may not wind up a gazillionaire like Joseph for doing this.  
But you may just be advancing God's Kingdom  
in ways you could never, ever have foreseen.  
Amen.