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Rev. Curran Reichert

The Arc of Forgiveness

Genesis 45:1-15

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. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 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. 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. 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. 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.' And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. 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." Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

"One day we are going to be in heaven together, so we might as well learn to get along here because we will have to get along there. God won't have it any other way." [**Gene Robinson**](#)

Had we been together in person on August 2nd, we might have had one of Mary Evelyn's delicious cake's to celebrate our fourth anniversary in ministry together, but these days it seems that weeks, even months go by, one fading into the next- leaving most of us feeling a little lost. Still, this anniversary did give me pause to consider all that life has encompassed with you these last four years.

For starters I can say, I don't think they have been what any of us expected they might be. Ministry always has high and low point, but usually it also has a lot of middle ground, what we might call ordinary time. For all of us, these past four years, there has not been much ordinary time.

When I arrived in the summer of 2016, the congregation was in the midst of big decisions concerning the renovation of the sanctuary, chief among them deciding whether or not to remove the Bergstrom organ, and what would become of the heritage cross prominently displayed on the front wall of our sacred space. These were important questions, generational questions. I did my best to engage and preach about them, but truth be told we had only just met, and I scarcely had the longevity to be taken seriously. Fortunately, the wisdom of long timers like Helen Roundtree prevailed and decisions were made. The organ and the cross now have happy new homes and the result of the renovation is beautiful. Though, the process was not without its challenges and it has taken some time to heal from all the disruption.

So much change all at once, with a minister so different from the two introverts who preceded her. Staff turnover that same year brought a most unexpected joy in the hiring of our now beloved Stephanie Ozer. Where would we be with you Stephanie?

We were scarcely back into our newly renovated sanctuary when in the fall of 2017 the Tubbs fire permanently changed life as we knew it. For the year that followed we would wrestle with the effects of trauma, relying on the bravery and resiliency of Linda and Randy States, and Barbara Naslund to teach us how to rebuild a life after losing a home.

The congregation stood as one, we grew closer and continued to build a vibrant church community, welcoming new members and saying goodbye to cherished others. We held together through the deaths of two stalwart men; Rudy Dorman and Ev Evkhanian in 2018, yet with every fall came the difficult reminder of our vulnerability as a county with continued school shut downs, PG and E black outs, and more mandatory evacuations.

Even now, we know that we are coming into another fire season which is difficult emotionally for everyone, and we are entering the sixth month of a pandemic that has displaced everything we could rely on in the past, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

These four years the unexpected has become the norm, yet still here we are as a congregation- celebrating Joanne Gilmore's 100th birthday, while our youngest members figuring out how to begin a new school year virtually. We meet every Sunday and carry on the best we can.

None of it is perfect, but still we are together proclaiming the presence of God among and within us even as our dailiness is different than we ever expected it would be. We are on zoom, and in small groups, in letters and phone calls, searching for ways to stay connected, supported, with one another and with God. I think it is safe to say that we are **survivors**.

In these past four years, we have witnessed horrible things and we have witnessed beautiful things; Charlotte, Grace, and Ella Rose, to name a few.

The flowers continue to bloom, there is still great kindness in our interactions with one another and yet, daily we become more and more aware of how white body supremacy has shaped the society in which we live, we have to face the facts that consciously or unconsciously we have participated perpetuating great inequity in our nation and that has to change. So, this passage from **Genesis (45:1-15)** has much to say to us because it is both about rejoicing, about the need to forgive, and the longing to begin again.

Joseph fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon Joseph's neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that they talked.

Ultimately, as people who believe in a benevolent force that beats the heart of the universe, we trust one thing: we trust that God is good- therefore we cling to the belief that life is fundamentally redeemable, and that every day we have the opportunity to live as renewed creations in God.

At a time of deep political and social unrest, we must hold onto God's promise of reconciliation and repair. The fact that our ancestors- as a remnant people- kept on keeping on through famines, plagues, war, destruction, and disbelief, the fact that we are still here, still longing to be family with one another seems clear and present evidence of the great through line that we call God.

Time and time again we have seen people who have every reason to hate or kill one another make to the choice instead to find a path of care, a path of reparation, a path to wholeness. We too can make those choices, with the help of God.

"Truth can be told in an instant, forgiveness can be offered spontaneously,

but reconciliation is the work of lifetimes and generations." Krista Tippett, Speaking of Faith

It seems to me that our nation is longing to find a way forward, we are weeping at the necks of those we previously thought were against us, and begging for a path toward reconciliation, they are weeping upon our necks and asking for the same.

This kind of humility is life changing, there is beauty in knowing when it is time to turn around and begin again. The story of Joseph and his brothers who sold him into slavery is one of radical forgiveness, it is a story about survival, it is a story about grace. God knows it is not all roses and unicorns after that, but this story shows that no circumstance is beyond redemption.

So, my friends, I wonder what are areas in need of reconciliation in your life?

What is one reconciliation you could be working on right now?

With God's help, who might you need to forgive, and weep with?

God of the Israelites, the same God whom Jesus loved- promised that no matter how bad life got at any moment, a moment would not last forever. The arc of God's love is longer than any moment, it is longer than a pandemic, it is longer than any ministry, or election cycle. This mystery, this truth to which we can trust our most vulnerable selves belongs to us in a way that no earthy realm can equal.

Reconciliation may indeed take a lifetime to be made manifest, some of us may not live to see it all resolved, but rest assured resolved it will be in this life or the next.

May we set about the work of Joseph this week, forgiving that which has been done to us and asking for forgiveness from those who feel they have been wronged by us. With God's help all things are possible.

Amen

