

Welcome

When she was 19 years old, Philomena Lee had a baby. She barely knew the father and, having been raised in a conservative religious home in early 20th-century Ireland, had never learned where babies come from.

When her parents learned she was pregnant, they put her in a convent to have the baby in secret. And after the baby was born, the convent adopted the boy to a couple.

Philomena never saw her son again.

In 2003, when she was 70 years old, Philomena confessed to her other children that they had an older brother they'd never met. Her daughter convinced a British journalist to help Philomena find her lost son.

Eventually, they learned that his adoptive parents were American. Her son had worked in politics in Washington, D. C. and had died in 1993.

Then they learned that her son had made three separate trips to the convent where he'd been born seeking information about his birth mother.

And all three times, the convent had lied, telling him they didn't have any information.

I want to pause Philomena's story here and ask what you would do in her place.

I'd be furious. I would feel a deep sense of sadness. I'd want justice.

But what does justice look like for Philomena Lee? The nun who'd overseen all this was long dead. Her son was dead.

I tell you the story of Philomena Lee because she has taught me so much about forgiveness.

And I want to talk about forgiveness today. So often we think of forgiveness as an external movement, something that happens between two people. If you wrong me, forgiving you is what I do when we reconcile.

But I want to suggest today that we've got it backwards. Reconciliation, the healing of the relationship between us, is good. But it's not the same as forgiveness.

After all, sometimes reconciliation isn't possible. It wasn't for Philomena. And sometimes the person who wronged us isn't willing to change. Sometimes reconciliation can be dangerous!

But forgiveness is something we can do whether or not the other person is willing or able to reconcile. Forgiveness is a process we enter into, a choice we make again and again.

When we choose to forgive, we create a new world of possibilities. We find freedom from what was done to us. So today is about learning how to forgive. And the journey of forgiveness begins by recognizing the God who is with us always inviting us into that new world.

Let's begin by worshiping that God!

Message

This is the final week of our summer series, called "The Way, Way Back". Hopefully that calls to mind summer vacations, road trips and fights over who got to ride in the way, way back of the station wagon. (I know, no one drives station wagons anymore because we got SUVs and convinced ourselves they're different.) This series is all about the things we learn when we're willing to leave home - aka our comfort zones.

We're in the book of Genesis, following the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith as they follow God on road trips of their own. We first met Abraham, then Isaac and Jacob. For the last three weeks, we've been in the story of Joseph, the last of Genesis' patriarchs.

We began with Joseph the Dreamer. We saw that, when God gives us dreams, they're always disruptive to the status quo, and there're always people who want to stop the dream. Joseph, the youngest brother, dreamed that his father and brothers would all bow down and worship him. So his brothers faked his death and sold him into slavery.

Last week, we saw what those dream-killers cost Joseph. We saw him falsely imprisoned, left to rot. But we saw, too, that no one can stop God's Dream, and when we ended last week, Joseph was the second most powerful person in the world, behind only Pharaoh.

[Scripture Slide 1] Today, we see the fulfillment of the Dream. Against all odds, Joseph has become that figure in his dream. His main job has been to prepare Egypt for a 7-year famine, and he's done an outstanding job. When the famine strikes, the whole region - including the Promised Land - comes to Egypt to get food.

And guess who shows up? Joseph's brothers.

They don't recognize him. They kneel before him before him. They beg for food.

What would you do if you were Joseph, standing here with the ones who wronged you so long ago, who caused you so much pain and misery, kneeling before you, completely at your mercy?

What Joseph did might surprise you, unless you remember he's from a family of tricksters. Joseph, seemingly on the spot, concocts an elaborate ruse where he accuses them of being spies and demands proof (this is all in chapters 42-44 - read it this week. Game of Thrones has nothing on this story.).

Long story short, Joseph becomes convinced his brothers have changed. They're not the same bullies who sold him into slavery because they were threatened by his Dream.

Joseph even dares to wonder if they've changed enough to be ready to join in the world of God's Dream.

So, in chapter 45, Joseph brings his brothers back to face him one more time. Let's look at this picture of reconciliation together, then walk through a couple of key moments:

Joseph could stand it no longer. There were many people in the room, and he said to his attendants, "Out, all of you!" So he was alone with his brothers when he told them who he was. Then he broke down and wept. He wept so loudly the Egyptians could hear him, and word of it quickly carried to Pharaoh's palace.

"I am Joseph!" he said to his brothers. "Is my father still alive?" But his brothers were speechless! They were stunned to realize that Joseph was standing there in front of them. "Please, come closer," he said to them. So they came closer. And he said again, "I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into slavery in Egypt."

Joseph introduces himself by giving his name... "I am Joseph!" We often breeze right past that, but you might recognize that this is the formula God uses to introduce Godself to humanity. "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" or "I am the God of your fathers" or even simply, "I am."

It's no accident. In this moment, when Joseph offers not revenge but forgiveness, Joseph becomes an image of his creator. Joseph enacts the work of God by forgiving his brothers and seeking reconciliation with them.

What's more, Joseph is imitating God's creative activity. In the opening chapter of Genesis, God shapes chaos into an ordered, beautiful world by speaking it into existence.

So too, Joseph now creates a world of new possibilities for his brothers by speaking peace into existence. He transforms their shame into love by calling them to 'come closer, come closer'.

This is a beautiful scene. It's one of the most powerful images of forgiveness we have in all literature.

But it *does* beg the question... How did Joseph do it?

We don't get any insight into Joseph's headspace over those long years. But something he says next to his brothers that gives us an insight:

But don't be upset, and don't be angry with yourselves for selling me to this place. It was God who sent me here ahead of you to preserve your lives. This famine that has ravaged the land for two years will last five more years, and there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. God has sent me ahead of you to keep you and your families alive and to preserve many survivors. So it was God who sent me here, not you! And he is the one who made me an adviser to Pharaoh—the manager of his entire palace and the governor of all Egypt.

In the long years he has been in Egypt, Joseph has discerned the hand of God at work. When he was in that pit, God was with him, working. When he was sold to Potiphar, God was with him, working. When he was wrongfully imprisoned, God was with him, working. When he was left to rot in that prison, God was with him, working.

And God was with him when he heard Pharaoh's dreams, when he interpreted them.

God was with him when he organized the famine preparation, and administered the famine relief.

And God was with him, working to bring all Israel's sons to him so that Joseph could be the means by which the Dream God gave Abraham might continue.

It is because Joseph has sought out God's invisible hand, at work in unremarkable, ordinary ways, that he can choose to forgive his brothers.

Joseph has made a choice over and over, in every circumstance, whether in the pit or the prison or the palace to look for God at work. He's chosen by faith to live not in the world his brothers created through their sin, but the world God is bringing about, the world of the Dream.

Let's stop for a moment and ask: did God cause Joseph's slavery? Were the brothers not free to choose? Were they - and Joseph - just pawns in God's cosmic game?

No.

The idea that we have no free will, that God manipulates us, is antichrist. Rather, we recognize that God is like a master chess player: no matter what moves our human sinfulness enact, God will accomplish God's purposes.

There's a different way this story unfolded, where Joseph's brothers didn't choose sin, but listened to God's dream through their brother. Without the sin of Potiphar's wife or the forgetfulness of the baker. There's a version of the story where Joseph ends up in the palace *without* the pit and the prison.

God's Dream was always going to become a reality because that's who God is. The question isn't are we pawns in God's game, but rather, which side will we choose to be on? The side of God, who always wins in the end, or the side of sin, slavery and death?

Forgiveness is that interior journey of looking for God at work, saying Yes to God's Dream.

So it's that easy? Just to forgive?

No. Forgiveness is anything but easy.

After the journalist helped Philomena discover the truth about her son, he wrote a book about the experience called *The Lost Son of Philomena Lee*. As many good stories do, this one got turned into a movie.

They got none other than Dame Judy Dench to play Philomena, and they created a scene at the end of Philomena's story. The journalist returns with Philomena to the convent to confront the old nun (who the film kept alive for the purposes of this confrontation). He, raging at the injustice of the whole situation, storms into the convent and forces a confrontation with the old nun. She's unapologetic. Unrepentant. As are the priest and the other nuns.

He rages, insisting they apologize, when Philomena finally makes it into the room. She quiets him, insists that it's her choice what she does.

What can Philomena do? Her son is dead. The nun, the convent, is unwilling to acknowledge they did anything wrong. Unlike Joseph's brothers, they haven't changed.

So what choice does she have?

And then she makes her choice. She crosses to the old nun, looks her square in the face and says,

"Sister Hildegard, I want you to know that I forgive you."

And the journalist says what we're all thinking. "What?! Just like that?"

Philomena gasps, "It's not just like that. That's hard. That's hard for me. But I don't want to hate people."

She can choose to be free. She can choose not to live in a world defined by what they did to her. So she does. She chooses to forgive. And then she goes to visit her son's grave, to say hello and goodbye.

Is Philomena powerless? I suggest not. Her choice to forgive made her story a powerful one - powerful enough to capture the hearts of journalists, publishers and filmmakers. Her Christlike example has

become famous across the world. Her choice has become a beacon for thousands who have been wronged, who are hurting.

Powerless? Hardly, my friends. She has become a blessing to the world. So too, did Joseph. After reconciling with his brothers, he tells them:

“Now hurry back to my father and tell him, ‘This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me master over all the land of Egypt. So come down to me immediately! You can live in the region of Goshen, where you can be near me with all your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and everything you own. I will take care of you there, for there are still five years of famine ahead of us. Otherwise you, your household, and all your animals will starve.’ ”

Then Joseph added, “Look! You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that I really am Joseph! Go tell my father of my honored position here in Egypt. Describe for him everything you have seen, and then bring my father here quickly.” Weeping with joy, he embraced Benjamin, and Benjamin did the same. Then Joseph kissed each of his brothers and wept over them, and after that they began talking freely with him. -- Genesis 45:1-15

Jacob brings his family to Egypt and they are cared for throughout the famine. God's dream became a reality.

Philomena found her lost son and forgave an impossible crime. And God's kingdom became a little more visible here on the earth.

Friends, we have a choice: we can live in the pit, the prison, allow our world to be defined by the person who sinned against us.

Or we can insist that God is up to something. We can look through eyes of faith for how God is at work despite their best efforts to destroy us. And we can live in the world God is bringing about.

When we choose to forgive, we're saying goodbye to the old world. When we choose to forgive, we're speaking a new world into existence. And we're inviting even those who wronged us to come there with us.

Communion + Examen

Jesus opened this new world for us by forgiving us. Let us come to be reconciled to him.

1. How have I chosen forgiveness in the last week?
2. When have I allowed what others have done to me to define my world?
3. When in the next week might I let my world be defined by others?
4. How can I choose to look for God at work in my circumstances this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Forgiveness takes a long time (Joseph and Philomena had *years*). But every journey begins with some first step. What is yours this week?