

Who Are Your People?
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, August 16, 2020
The Rev. Paul McLain

'You shall be near me, you and your children, and your children's children.' In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

There is an old proverb among business people in Mississippi. It goes like this: 'Never allow only an hour for a business lunch. Always allow at least an hour and a half, because you'll spend the first half hour answering one question: Who are your people?' I learned very quickly the wisdom of this proverb. My potential customer and I would sit down and begin a winding conversation that went up, down, and across our family trees until we finally discover that my third cousin removed on my mother's side, who now lives in Forest, once babysat his nephew's stepdaughter back when they lived in Aberdeen. After that mutual discovery, we would give each other a knowing smile that meant we could finally eat and get down to business. Finding even this very tenuous shared connection somehow meant that we were part of a shared story, and we had the basis for building a shared trust.

Our Old Testament lesson today is the final part of the story of Joseph, the eleventh and favorite son of Jacob. If Joseph had been asked that question, who are your people, he would have a complicated answer. His people had abandoned him. When Joseph was seventeen, he had two dreams. In one, the eleven bundles of grain gathered by his brothers bow down to his bundle of grain. In the other, the sun, moon, and eleven stars, meant to represent his father, mother, and brothers, bow down to Joseph. On top of this, his father gave Joseph a coat of many colors. Needless to say, his brothers were jealous. When an opportunity presents itself, they plot to kill him.

Reuben, one of the brothers, convinces them to throw him into an empty well instead. Then, Judah, another brother, says there's no profit in leaving him for dead so, they sell Joseph to slave traders, bound for Egypt. They strip him of his coat, put some blood on it, and trick their father into believing his favorite son is dead.

Joseph went on to win the trust of his master in Egypt. But he was falsely accused by his master's wife, and wound up in prison. His gift for dreams and interpreting dreams brought him to the attention of Pharaoh. He rightly interprets Pharaoh's dream predicting seven good years followed by seven years of famine. And Pharaoh names Joseph as his second-in-command for all the Egyptian empire.

If Joseph had been asked at that point, who are your people, I wonder if he would have said, 'the Egyptians.' After all, Pharaoh gave him an Egyptian name and an Egyptian wife. Joseph spent all his waking hours gathering up food in his adopted country, to save his new people of Egypt from the coming famine. Joseph even named his firstborn son Manasseh, which means 'making to

forget.' He said he gave his son this name because 'God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house.' But, did he really forget them or his story with them?

In the midst of the famine, Joseph's father Jacob hears there is grain in Egypt. He tells his sons to go there and get food. And he tells them to leave his youngest son Benjamin behind with him, worried about Benjamin's safety. As they are standing in line for food, Joseph recognizes his brothers. But they do not recognize him.

He could have killed them for what they did to him years ago. He had the power to do anything he wanted with them. He decided to test them to see if they would bring Benjamin to him, and to see if he could somehow restore trust with them. The brothers pass all his tests. In fact, Reuben and Judah are willing to sacrifice themselves so that the new favored brother Benjamin can be saved.

Joseph discovers that time has changed his brothers. Time has mellowed them; they are humbler and purer in soul. James Howell writes, 'Time can embitter; but time can be the hospital in which the pained soul is rehabilitated. Dark days and years may be getting us ready for new life.'

At long last, Joseph can no longer contain himself. He pours out tears from years of trying to forget them, while still longing for something that he tried to bury deep within his sub-conscious mind and heart. Joseph's brothers are shocked and speechless when he reveals his identity. They are probably ashamed and scared. Joseph tells them not to be distressed or angry with themselves. He tells them that God has somehow worked through their abandonment of him to save lives, especially theirs.

Does this mean their acts in the past toward him were justified? No. Forgiveness does not wipe away all the past hurt and pain, nor all the consequences of our actions. It does have the power to begin to heal those wounds, as well as the power to restore a relationship and rebuild trust. Forgiveness is needed as much by the forgiver as the forgiven. Joseph didn't know how much he needed to forgive them, until that moment when the tears rushed out of him.

One of the most memorable sermons in our Lenten Preaching Series in recent years was one by Bishop Rob Wright of Atlanta. He talked about the possibilities that are opened up by re-entering a conversation that you may feel ended long ago. Joseph found a way to do that. He tells his brothers he will provide a place for them. He wants to keep them close. And he wants them to bring his father back to him. Then Joseph kisses each one of his brothers, and weeps over each one of them.

James Howell again writes, 'Forgiveness is the hard labor of emotion, new habits of mind and heart, and a determination to see what God sees.'

Perhaps the question is not, who are your people. The question is, who are *we* as the forgiven and forgiving people of God? This pandemic, in the midst of all its death and heartache, has given us time to reflect on our story, think about who and what matter most to us, and reconnect with forgotten people in our lives. What would it mean to look back on our shared story, even with all its evil, pain, and hurt, and see it anew through the eyes of God? *Amen.*