

A Family Reunion
Genesis 45:1-15
August 3, 2008

The musical team of Gilbert and Sullivan were doing very well together until they bought a theater. "Then Sullivan decided it ought to be recarpeted. So he bought the carpet, but Gilbert intercepted the bill. When he got the bill, he was very angry and hit the ceiling. He took Sullivan to court because he felt that as long as Sullivan had ordered the carpet without consulting him, he should not have to pay for it. It all wound up in a great lawsuit.

"There was so much anger that neither one of those men spoke again as long as they lived. When Sullivan wrote the music, he sent it by messenger to Gilbert. Gilbert would pen the words and send it by messenger back to Sullivan. Then when they would have their wonderful performances, they would each come from opposite ends of the stage to take their bows, but they never looked at each other. They never said a word to each other again as long as they lived."ⁱ

Unfortunately the holding of grudges and lack of forgiveness can ruin even rich and meaningful relationships. This morning we enter into a crucial moment in the life of Jacob's family. Twenty years earlier eleven of his sons disappeared Joseph, sending him off to Egypt with traveling merchants. The brothers were jealous because Joseph was their father's favorite son and Joseph let the preferential treatment "go to his head." We haven't heard much of the brothers since then. We don't know if any of them still have a twinge of conscience, or whether they have forgotten their horrible deed. Certainly their father, Jacob, has never forgotten. In spite of the terrible mistreatment from his brothers, Joseph has been rather successful in his life. He became the assistant to Potiphar, the captain of the guard. After a time in jail, Joseph was appointed to a position comparable to the secretary of agriculture of Egypt. He wisely monitored the food production of the nation so that they would have sufficient food to feed the peoples of the world during a time of famine.

Jacob and his sons are in need of food supplies from Egypt. Initially Jacob sends ten sons to secure food. Unbeknownst to them, the food czar is their brother Joseph, whom they tried to get rid of 20 years earlier. They do not recognize Joseph, but he recognizes them. As in one of Joseph's youthful dreams, the brothers bow down before him. Joseph does not reveal his identity. He claims to be suspicious of their motives, accusing them of being spies. Joseph is torn between the pain of the past hurt and his love for his brothers and father. Forgiveness does not come readily. He imprisons them for three days. Eventually he sells them grain but insists on keeping one brother as a security deposit until they return with their youngest brother, Benjamin, Joseph's blood brother. When they return home to Canaan, their father Jacob is understandably distraught. One son is dead (or so he thinks), a second held hostage, and a third is in jeopardy. He is reluctant to send his sons back to Egypt.

Two years later the famine is so severe that Jacob has no choice but to send his sons, including Benjamin, back to Egypt. Joseph prepares a great feast for his brothers at his palace, but even now he does not reveal his identity. When Joseph sees his brother Benjamin, he is so overcome with emotion that he runs out of the room to weep. Eventually a deal is struck; grain is sold and packaged for the return trip. But Joseph has his servants pack his personal cup in

Benjamin's bag. After the caravan leaves, Joseph sends his soldiers out announcing that the cup has been stolen. Upon a search the cup is found in Benjamin's bag. All the brothers are arrested and forced to return to the palace. Joseph decrees that the "thief" must remain in Egypt. Knowing that this will literally be the death of Jacob, they plead for one of them to take Benjamin's place. Finally Joseph is ready to stop his deceptive ploys. He sends the Egyptians away and reveals himself to his brothers. He falls into his brothers' arms weeping.

The Bible tells us that the brothers were dismayed upon hearing this revelation. Imagine their feelings. They must have been afraid that Joseph would retaliate against them for their evil deed of years past. In fact, Joseph had been playing games with them, holding one hostage, planting his cup and accusing Benjamin of being a thief. He has not been honest in disclosing his identity. The brothers wonder whether they can trust this man. What kind of amends does he want from them?

Forgiveness does not come easily to Joseph. He still harbors anger and bitterness from those earlier years. He acts out of that anger in the manipulative games he plays. He is not honest or forthright. He needs some time to sort through his feelings and determine his ultimate response to his brothers. Forgiveness is not easy, nor does it come quickly.

Ultimately Joseph's love for his father and brothers triumphs over the pain they caused him years ago. He offers the embrace of his heart. Beyond a new relationship, he offers them the possibility of a future, inviting them to live with him in Egypt so that he might help them survive the famine.

The story shows us an honest picture of the difficulty of mending what is broken. It affirms that reunions and reconciliation in families and other relationships are not often easy. We know what betrayal feels like: the alcoholic parent who disappoints the family time and time again; spouses who find that love cannot withstand the pressures of life; siblings or dear friends who abandon a beloved or a friend when the need is greatest. We have been betrayed and we have betrayed others. That is our human reality.

How we respond to those who have caused us pain is our choice. Responding with grace, forgiveness, and love is not easy. Like Joseph, we have deep feelings of pain, resentment, anger, and bitterness which must be confronted. We need not deny these feelings, for they are real and valid. It is healthy to acknowledge them as part of the process of letting them go. Owning our feelings helps release us and others from the prison of the past. It frees us to embrace new possibilities for our lives. Joseph chooses to let go of the past, forgive his brothers, and move ahead with God into reconciliation.

Reconciliation does not always follow forgiveness. Sometimes we can forgive, but we choose not to reconcile with a party. Jacob's family is able to reunite in spite of the wrongs of the past. Once again Joseph experiences his family as a joy rather than a burden and the twelve brothers are restored to life together.

The sacrament of Holy Communion is like a family reunion of sorts. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. As in families of origin, there are differences of opinion in the family of God. We experience God's call differently. Each of us is uniquely created by God. In spite of our differences, we allow the overarching, all-embracing love of God to overcome those things that might divide us. We realize that there are far greater reasons to unite our lives in love and our talents in service. We seek to let go of our grudges and in the spirit of Christ, extend the gift of

forgiveness. The Lord's Table is one of the most symbolic expressions of our unity. We gather to share one loaf and one cup because we are one body in Christ. In this act, we participate in God's work of mending what has been broken.

Marcia King learned that her great-grandfather was a slave owner. Her grandfather was born in Perry, Georgia in 1868, after the Civil War had ended. There was a family disagreement that resulted in her grandfather losing most of his part of the family inheritance. Her grandfather left home and went north to the textile mill town of Dalton, Georgia. He never talked much about his family, which is why his granddaughter never knew that they had connections to people in south Georgia and to slaveholding.

In researching the family history, they learned that when the slaves were freed, great-grandfather King had given them a plot of land on which to build a church. That church, named after the family, is called King's Chapel. A permanent building was built in 1878 and services have been held in that place ever since.

This history was discovered in the mid 1970's, just as members of King's Chapel were planning a hundredth anniversary celebration and a reunion of the church families. The King descendants were invited to join the slave descendants for the anniversary and reunion.

Marcia wrote that it seemed as if hundreds of people were there. It was a great old country church experience with worship, dinner on the grounds with the most incredible food, and a great deal of visiting. Her family was received with such welcome and joy it was humbling. Her cousin was asked to address the crowd. He reminded them that Martin Luther King, Jr., had said, "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood," and that was exactly what they were doing there in that church. It was a very emotional moment. The presence of the Holy Spirit was palpable in that old sanctuary, where children of slaves had once been illegally taught to read and write.

Marcia expected to meet at least one person who wanted to let her know that this reunion was not all peace and love. One of her relatives perpetuated an evil system that treated human beings as property. But the day was not one of recrimination. It was a day to celebrate the remarkable achievements of former slaves who thought one of the most important things they could do when they were free was to set aside a place to worship God.ⁱⁱ

Forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation are oftentimes long and painful in coming. As we give ourselves to God, who desires to mend what is broken, we might surprisingly find ourselves dining together even with those whom we have named as enemies. May God's healing and reconciling power be at work in the broken places of our lives.

i Arthur H. DeKruyter, "Keep Your Cool," Oak Brook, Ill. *Homiletics Online*, retrieved July 31, 2008.

ii Marcia King, *Alive Now*, September/October 2003, pp. 20-22.