

What We Carry  
Genesis 50.15-21 and Matthew 18.21-35  
September 17, 2017  
Pentecost + 15A  
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Three weeks ago we began with Joseph, the younger brother sold into Egyptian slavery by his older brothers because they envied the favoritism and affection their father Jacob showed him. Genesis 37.4 tells us, “when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.” They sold him, created false evidence to indicate he’d been eaten by wild animals, and they assumed they’d never see him again. Yet Joseph was protected and blessed by God in his time in Egypt and rose to the second most powerful position in leadership, second only to the Pharaoh.

We step into that story today at its end. The famine has come, the brothers have approached Joseph for help, and in the days between Joseph first seeing them and eventually revealing that he is the brother they left for dead, there is tremendous emotion. Joseph tests the brothers, all the while wanting access to his family, particularly his father. In between the exchanges, Joseph steps away from the scene to be alone for a moment as he is overcome with emotion. He turns from them and weeps and then returns to them, the text tells us. When he finally reveals his identity to his brothers, he tells them, “‘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.” (Genesis 45.13-15) There’s weeping with father and son reunite. Weeping when Jacob dies. Weeping to the point that the Egyptians wept with Joseph for 70 days. The brothers who once could not speak peaceably now cry and talk and cling to one another.

As we reach the end of their story, the reunited brothers have just buried their father together. The group turns to Joseph and ask his forgiveness for the unspeakable things they did to him. We don’t really have insight into their souls—is this a genuine apology? is it an apology rooted in fear now that their father isn’t alive to stand between the brothers? have they actually come to their senses and recognized the depth of their brokenness, cruelty, and betrayal? We do not know. What we know is that they weep. Joseph weeps. They offer themselves to him as his servants, but he

receives them with forgiveness saying, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good."

Let's take a breath and take a beat as we let this story sink in. Today's scripture readings are laying out some heavy truth that we might begin to feel in parts of our selves that we work hard to ignore. I often acknowledge, particularly as we pray, we are carrying all kinds of emotions and thoughts with us all the time; even if we are working to keep them at bay, push them down, climb on top of them in hopes of dominating them rather than feeling them (that's often my personal favorite until it serves as something of a trampoline or volcano as the pile of thoughts and feelings finally cannot be held down any longer—not the healthiest game I play, but one that some of you may also know). In addition to present day fear, despair, sadness, or whatever it is we're holding onto, we also carry grief and trauma from past hurts and losses. Even at our healthiest and best, we carry some stuff.

The scripture lessons before us this morning invite us to name and release some of this through acts of forgiveness. I want us to think about forgiveness today as releasing—not necessarily reconciling, not staying in a toxic situation because we confuse forgiveness with abuse, not letting someone get away with behavior that is abhorrent—releasing. Forgiveness as releasing the grip we have on all that we carry. Releasing ourselves from the attachments we sometimes develop to our own grief and trauma and pain stories. Releasing ourselves from the control someone else holds over this through our own refusal to forgive. This kind of forgiveness is about being set free. We need to do some of the releasing and we all need to be released at this depth of freedom ultimately known as *shalom*—the abundant peace of God drawing everything toward wholeness.

Of course we know my individual work and your individual work will take us to a place where we're releasing old pains and old traumas at a connected, corporate level. I talk a lot about us as a people when we're reading scripture because I think that is one of the themes of scripture our churches in the United States (particularly majority white churches) need to hear most. This story we tell is our collective story and each of our personal stories; it is every bit both. As a whole, we can surely make a list of ways our churches need to seek out forgiveness because we are already stepping on the path here to undoing the sins of racism, healing broken teaching used as a weapon against LGBTQ+ family, sexism, anti-semitism, colonialism, and all kinds of othering.

We know this. Some of us know this from the receiving end of abuse in the church and you have miraculously, by the grace of God, stuck with the church and found a way to study and worship and live out what you knew to be true even though someone was

telling you it couldn't be true for you. Some of us know this because we are learning a different way of knowing God and studying the very scriptures once used to oppress, limit, minimize, and abuse. We are waking up to ways of collective forgiveness and undoing that will take lifetimes to undo. Jesus knew this, and that's why he didn't put a maximum on how many attempts we should make at this work. Maybe 70x7 might begin to get the work done, but commit to the work of loving and releasing and telling the truth for a lifetime rather than an agreed upon timeline and process or absolute outcome.

At the same time, I want for us to hear these texts today as deeply personal, too. Hear these words speaking directly to your heart. Hear these words wrapping their way around whatever sits beneath the surface of your life. Let them have their way in you and ultimately release you from carrying it all—or carrying it all by yourself—any longer. Know this is our work together and each of our life's work, side-by-side.

I spent the past two-and-a-half days with friends from St. Charles and 45 others from faith communities around town as we gave ourselves to the work of Undoing Racism with the guidance of the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. This was not altogether new work for me, but the process was certainly new. A slow, unfolding process with clear parameters, a sequence not revealed to participants, and a firm moratorium on talking too soon about solutions and outcomes. The process put me in touch with feelings I knew were in me but did not know were setting up home and making a place to live—anger, resentment, deep grief, overwhelming shame, and my forever heartbeat of perfectionism. Around 10:30 yesterday morning it all came spinning out of me as I no longer had patience with the white church in America and its denial and abuse and complicity and arrogance and my shame for being associated with it and my inability to single-handedly dismantle centuries of abusive teaching and practice. Well, that's a lot, and I share this not to focus too much on my own stuff but to say before you, I know how to name some of the stuff I carry and still get surprised by it at times. And if you don't know how to name the stuff you carry, we'll work on that here together. Because we're about the work of releasing and making peace—that's good news, gospel, the heartbeat of Jesus.

It was Dr. Don Erwin of the St. Thomas' Community Health Center, a member at Trinity Church, and a committed leader in Undoing Racism, who released me yesterday. After our first session on our last day together, he asked for some time with me. In our conversation he looked into my eyes in one of those knowing, fully seen kind of ways and said, "I hope you realize you don't have to do all of this work by yourself. In fact, you can't do all of this work by yourself." I'm not sure I can capture all of the other words of grace and peace that this dear man and community leader spoke over me,

but those words of release landed. To see another human and offer the promise of walking together, carrying our stuff together, doing our work together. That is a gift I want to give each of you today as we consider how we need to extend and experience release. You don't have to do all of this work, whatever this releasing, setting free work is for you and for us, by yourself.

When it comes to forgiveness as life's work, Nadia Bolz-Weber observes that the work is multi-directional. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Jesus always seems to be pairing God's forgiveness of us with our forgiveness of others."<sup>1</sup> Hear that with the word release—Jesus always seems to be pairing our release with the release of others. We do this work together, we do this work for each other. My release impacts yours, your release impacts mine. When we model Jesus' way, we are setting people free all over the place.

Nadia goes on to say that this forgiveness is so significant that it is God's "way of combating evil. It's not punishment and it's not retaliation, fear or anger. It's forgiveness. Forgiveness is God's way of combating evil."

She gets at this same idea of release, adding, "We are cut loose. God's forgiveness is like giant bolt-cutters. And then God says go and do likewise. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Cut others loose too. Jesus commands it. He commands us to forgive just as he commands us to love...maybe forgiveness is actually the opposite of saying that what someone has done is ok...it's saying it's so not ok that I am not going to absorb it any more. I simply won't be tied to it...Because we can't be bound to that kind of evil. Lest it find the evil in our own hearts and make its home there."

This is certainly our work together as a collective. Our collective release is intertwined in the ways we ask forgiveness/offer forgiveness, set others free and set ourselves free. How many times do we do it? Don't count. Just do the work. Give yourself to the work of letting go and being set free. Nadia puts it like this, "So if there is someone who you feel you just can't forgive think about how much that resentment is continuing to tie you to them and know that God wants you free from what was done to you. So here's what you do.... reach for the bolt-cutters. Because, when we forgive someone, it's not an act of niceness, it's not being a doormat, it's an act of fidelity to God's evil-combating campaign. Forgiveness is an act of fidelity to the kingdom of God and a defiant stance against the forces of evil – even the evil in our own hearts. And in turn when we are forgiven by someone else we are set free because they are saying they will no longer be bound to the harm we did them."

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.goodreads.com/author\\_blog\\_posts/1542722-sermon-on-forgiveness-on-9-11-2011](https://www.goodreads.com/author_blog_posts/1542722-sermon-on-forgiveness-on-9-11-2011)

This is such a significant part of what Jesus did, "he was going around telling people they were forgiven. He went about freeing people, cutting them loose. And that kind of freedom is always seen as threatening," because all of the forces of this earth that intend evil and separation and division and power and control and fear and rely on our distraction for their survival, well, scripture tells us that somehow, mysteriously and hiddenly and overwhelmingly, God is working in all of that for good.

May you give yourself to the life's work of cutting others loose and thereby discovering you, too have been released.

May you release all that you carry and know the freedom of forgiveness.

May you know you do not have to do this work alone.

May you be set free.