

WHEN WE KNOW OUR FORGIVENESS IS COMPLETE

There is an interesting story in the Bible where some people were not completely sure if they had been forgiven until a death happened. We find this story in Genesis 50 when Jacob died. Upon their father's death, Joseph's brothers were fearful that he had not truly forgiven them for selling him into slavery. Joseph had already forgiven them when he revealed his true identity to them but now that their father was dead the brothers wanted to be reassured that they had been completely forgiven by their brother. Joseph assured them by saying:

"Don't be afraid of me. Am I God, that I can punish you? You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so that I could save the lives of many people. No don't be afraid. I will continue to take care of you and your children." He reassured them by speaking kindly to them. (Genesis 50:19-21)

At this moment after their father's death, Joseph's brothers were assured that they had been completely forgiven. I think Joseph too received confirmation at this moment from God that his forgiveness was complete.

Sometimes death provides us with an opportunity to see if we have completely forgiven somebody. I experienced this reality last week. I was notified on Thursday that somebody from my past had passed away. I spent a lot of time around this person for a two- year period when I was 15 to 16 years old. This person had a very negative effect on my emotional well being during those two years. Things were said to me that were very hurtful. Some of the comments left emotional scars. I began to lose the love for the sport I was playing at the time because of the emotional abuse. I was always on edge wondering when the next emotional outburst would occur. I began to realize the negative impact this emotional abuse was having on my overall wellbeing. I decided to take a year off from playing that sport at a highly competitive level in order to focus on healing from the scars I incurred emotionally over the previous two years. Even though some people questioned my decision at the time it was the best thing I could have ever done. That year away from the abusive environment allowed me to heal emotionally. I found a love for the game again that had been taken away from me. My sense of self worth began to improve. I also found my inner strength again that helped me to

have a newfound confidence not to let negative comments from this individual or others to adversely affect me again. Most of all I learned to forgive this person during that year. A sign of my healing came the very first game I returned to playing at a competitive level. This individual was at that first game I played. They were surprised to see me return and made a negative comment just before the game was about to start. I did not let it affect me and responded with kindness instead. After the game this individual actually complimented me for how well I played after returning from a year off. I have seen this person maybe 4-5 times over the past forty years. Often it has been at the grocery store and each time I was pleasant and kind to this individual showing no hard feelings. I knew I had forgiven this person back when I was 17 but running into them on these rare occasions was confirming to me, I had. The last time I had seen this person was at the bank just before COVID. This person knew I had become a minister and said to me there that he needed a lot of forgiveness. I had already given mine to this person, but I wonder if others had not. I think this person's words were also a reflection that they had not sought God's forgiveness yet. When I learned of this person's death last week, there was no anger or bitterness on my part. My immediate thought was whether this individual had sought God's forgiveness before they died. Every encounter I had with this person was a test whether I had completely forgiven them. Every encounter, including learning of their death, was confirmation to me that I had.

I share this story to bring no blame or condemnation on this person. The reason why I am writing about Joseph's experience and my own is that we have all experienced emotional scarring and wounds from things other people have said or done. As Christians we are called to find forgiveness in our hearts for these people. The Lord's Prayer is a reminder to us of this calling. Forgiveness is one of the hardest things for us to do as Christians. We wish we could follow Jesus' example from the cross and forgive others for what they have done. We may try to do this as Jesus did, but find when we encounter that person, or hear their name spoken all the painful memories flood back and realize we have not got to the stage of complete forgiveness. To get to the point of complete forgiveness is a journey that takes time. Joseph probably did not forgive his brothers immediately after they sold him into slavery. I did not forgive this individual who hurt me right away either. Joseph had to work at forgiving and so too did I. Perhaps there is somebody

that all of us still need to work at in order to completely forgive. Joseph was able to do so with God's help and looking back it was Him who did it for me too. Even though I was just 17 at the time I knew God was helping me heal from the emotional scarring I experienced and helped me to finally choose to forgive this person. This is something that God is willing to do for each one of us if we are serious at completely forgiving somebody. Joseph would encourage each one of us to take this journey with God, and I would too. If we take this journey toward healing with God don't be surprised that He does not have us encounter the people that we are trying to forgive in order to show us how far we have come in our forgiveness. Who but God could have brought Joseph's brothers to Egypt during the famine to show Joseph he had completely forgiven them? Who but God could have arranged for this same individual I had to completely forgive to be at my first competitive game after returning from a year's absence? God wanted me to see how much He had helped me heal and come to a place of forgiveness. The other encounters I had with this person over a forty-year period were meant to do the same. We will have similar experiences at God's timing if we take this journey with Him so that He can show us how far we have come in our healing and willingness to forgive. The final test will come when that person passes away. Joseph had to prove he completely forgave his brothers after his father's death, and I had to prove I had done the same last week. When I learned of this person's passing, I was not bitter or angry in any way. I was at peace, not by the fact that I would never encounter them again, but that I had chosen to completely forgive them and showed it by talking kindly every time I saw that person. In fact, my hope last week was that before they died that person had sought forgiveness from God and made Jesus Lord over their life. Nothing would make me happier to know that by showing complete forgiveness on my part it may have had a positive witness on their life.

Completely forgiving somebody is as much for our sake as it is for the other person. Let's make sure that we let God help us on the journey to be able to completely forgive those who may have hurt us. Trust me, by so doing we can be at peace whenever we see that person, and even when they pass on. A lesson from Joseph, and from me as well.

Keep Safe and God Bless

Pastor Dean