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Athelstone Uniting Church #116

16 August 2020

Subversive Forgiveness

Text: *Genesis 45:1-15 and Matthew 15:21-28*

Prayer

God of love and compassion

with open arms You welcome us all

No one stands outside the circle of Your mercy and love.

Through the presence of Your Holy Spirit

open our eyes to see You;

open our minds to receive Your truth,

open our hearts to connect with your word on a deeper level that will lead to transformation in us and through us

in your name, Amen.

Crying

When is the last time you had a really good cry? You know.. the kind when you sob loudly, snort through your nose, and just let it all out?

Some of you, I imagine, have gone back to such a moment

Others, perhaps cringe at the thought

While others might be in need of a good cry right now!

Some people find it hard to cry while others cry easily. I have been through seasons in my life when I have cried a lot and other times when I haven't been able to cry for months on end.

There are 2 crying moments I distinctly remember:

One was at our oldest son Matthew's wedding. As I watched his bride, Bec, walk up the aisle, and saw the love in Matt and Bec's eyes, I found water leaking out of my eyes and had to suppress an audible and very unattractive snort! Have you ever done that? No? just me? Just as well the music was up loud enough and everyone was watching Bec, so no one seemed to notice my snort!

The other was 2 weeks ago, when, as I've shared with you before, I found myself overwhelmed after a challenging week and cried and cried. It was a moment of release of built

up emotion and tension which came as quite a surprise – I hadn't realised how overwhelmed I was until that instant! It was a cry I needed to have. It took a while but eventually I calmed down and was able to re-gain control and start reflecting on what was going on for me, and how to move forward and ask for help.

Did you notice how much crying went on in our readings?

Joseph

Joseph wept loudly!

If you go back, "Joseph had cried on a number of occasions leading up to this moment ¹ but this is not a normal cry. It is a weeping wail of epic proportions. Joseph had risen from a foreign slave to a position of leadership over all of the Egyptian empire. Yet for a moment, he could not control himself. He sent the people away so they couldn't hear, and yet, the weeping was so loud that it could be heard from those he sent away.

Crying is one way we express and process strong emotion. What was the emotion behind the weeping? Was it sadness? Was it joy? Was it just a release?

Perhaps our own last cry can help us appreciate this.

Not that time when a few tears leaked out of your eyes, but rather an ugly cry of biblical proportions – perhaps a little like mine. This kind of crying is something we usually do not plan for, it just comes out. Like Joseph, we cannot control it.

The loss of control for Joseph is a bit surprising in the context of how the book of Genesis has documented his life since Genesis 37 – which is where we had left him last week – sold by his brothers as a slave.

Joseph had been a brash youngest child and his lack of filter in those early days had severe consequences. But through his life he consistently displayed remarkable control under considerable pressure, whether in prison or in the presence of Pharaoh.

So here we find a surprising shift, as "Joseph could no longer control himself."

his crying spell marked a transformation. Joseph moves from a position of authority over his brothers to offers of generosity.

resentment from the past has disappeared.

Joseph is eager to forgive and restore the family, not just among his brothers but for a dysfunction that went right through his family.

The major part of his transformation appears to be a realisation that God had been active and present all along, even as a child sold to slavery.

Perhaps realisation that God had been with him all those times and all those years brought some of that weeping. Was it sadness? Was it joy? Was it just release?

¹ (Genesis 42:24; 43:30),

I think, Yes... and more... his weeping represented a profound transformation in Joseph.

After a lifetime of betrayal, abandonment, restriction, and isolation, Joseph chooses, very intentionally, the ways of forgiveness and grace. He was able to look back and see how God had been at work – bringing a new perspective on his brothers' behaviour and even on his own life. With this new perspective he was able to forgive his brother's behaviour.. a profound transformation marked by generosity and reconciliation – a beautiful moment as the brothers wept and hugged each other. ²

I believe that God was also present in the expression of Joseph's deepest emotions.

Canaanite woman

The Canaanite woman who visited Jesus cried out to him – a different kind of cry... still an expression of deep emotion – this time begging for mercy for her suffering daughter. There is nothing more powerful, tenacious or determined than a mother pleading on behalf of her child.

She had created a problem for Jesus and the disciples – she had crossed the line – both as a Canaanite and as a woman – in approaching Jesus.

In words that may sound cruel to our modern ears, Jesus pointed this out, as a proper Jew should do.. by highlighting that his mission was to the people of Israel. Even though she knew that her station in life made her equivalent if not less than the dogs that eat the crumbs below the table, she persisted.. it was in her persistence, in her expression of deep love and emotion for her daughter, that Jesus recognised that his mission was for people like her too.

Her persistent crying brought about a transformation in Jesus himself – when he realises that his mission is not just to the Israelites but to all people.. Jesus not only freed the woman and her daughter from their physical suffering he also freed himself from the restraints of limiting his message and word.

Here again, I believe God was present, in the expression of the woman's deepest emotions and the transformation that came about in Jesus.

Please note... I have been talking about a healthy normal range of emotions. If you feel 'out of control' (crying, sad, anxious) for 2 weeks or more, please see medical advise.

forgiveness

today's theme is all about forgiveness

forgiveness is a deeply emotional choice..

forgiveness is a healthy choice for us and for the one we forgive..

Forgiveness is letting go and finding a new way forward.

² Working preacher commentary: Roger Nam - Commentary on Genesis 45:1-15

Archbishop Desmond Tutu says that Forgiveness gives us the capacity to make a new start.. and forgiveness is the grace by which you enable the other person to get up, and get up with dignity, to begin anew..

Forgiveness doesn't mean letting the person who hurt you off the hook. They still have need to face consequences for their actions and we need to put boundaries in place to keep ourselves safe. But the victim can still come to a place of empathy and understanding.

Forgiveness leads to freedom..

People who practice forgiveness are shown to be less angry, and more optimistic, compassionate and self-confident. Stress levels are also heavily reduced.

Through forgiveness we can let go of long-held anger. When you do, your muscles relax, you're less anxious, you have more energy."

Forgiveness can also help rebuild self-esteem, "When you stand up to the pain of what happened to you and offer goodness to the person who hurt you, you change your view of yourself."³

Civil Rights leader, John Lewis, who died July 17, came to be known as the "Conscience of the US Congress," for his dedication to the highest ethical standards and moral principles throughout his life. From his first arrest at a lunch counter sit-in, through many subsequent arrests and beatings by state and federal officials and angry white mobs, he held fast to a belief in non-violence and reconciliation. And he never shrank from speaking out against injustice.

After serving on the Atlanta City Council, in 1986 Lewis was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, where he represented Georgia's 5th District for 17 terms.

Lewis dedicated his life to ensuring that with freedom came equality. More than that, he was firmly committed to the way of non-violence, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Never becoming bitter or vindictive, he said, "We were taught not to hate, not to become bitter, but to believe in the philosophy and discipline of non-violence, in the way of peace, in the way of love, the way of forgiveness and reconciliation."

While in prison, Lewis built relationships with his guards, treating them as fellow human beings, even when they abused him. In his memoir *Walking with the Wind*, he wrote that the essence of the non-violent life, "is the capacity to forgive and to understand that your attacker is as much a victim as you are." Lewis says there were many occasions when people who had wronged him would come to him to apologize and ask forgiveness. He not only forgave them but invited them to create a new set of relationships. He firmly believed in the power of forgiveness, for the one who forgives and the one forgiven.

Congressman Lewis had many encounters with people who had wronged him. One example dates back to 2009. The son of a man who had attacked Lewis at the bus station in Atlanta in 1961 had been encouraging his father to seek out the people he had wronged during that period. Father and son came to Lewis' office after all those years to apologize and ask for forgiveness. Lewis recalled that the father looked to be a little older than he was, which meant he was about 24 in 1961; Lewis only 21. On that day in 1961, Lewis and his seatmate had been badly beaten and left lying in a pool of blood at the Greyhound bus station. Lewis said to the man, "Yes I forgive you; I accept your apology." At this point, he recalled that the man's

³ <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2017/01/ce-corner>

son started crying, then man himself started to cry, as did Lewis. Then they hugged one another. Lewis recalled that they started calling one another "brother."^{4 5}

Subversive forgiveness

Forgiveness is subversive – particularly when it is undeserved.

It takes away the power of the one who has harmed you. They no longer hold any power over you.

This is what is behind the power of the cross.

Jesus let go of his power and allowed himself to be nailed to a cross – punished undeservedly.

Through his self sacrifice he transformed the cruel symbol of Roman power into a symbol of love

Colossians 3, verses 12 to 14 says:

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Reflecting on that image of the cross..

Geoff Bullock wrote these beautiful words:

I am carried in the arms Of grace and love divine
I am held by hands of healing Washed by water pure
Lifting up my heavy heart Held in grace-scarred hands, I am carried in the arms Of grace and love divine

The musicians are about to present this song to us.

As they sing I invite you to use this opportunity to reflect on the question

Where do you see a need for forgiveness today?

Lift this before God in prayer..

Amen

You can listen to this song here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCCfd7EnHsA>

⁴ https://www.seasonsonline.ca/10/august_16_2020_subversive_forgiveness/

⁵ Subversive Forgiveness by Sandra Rooney