

When I was in seminary in the Chicago area, I pulled off a great Valentine's Day gift for Renee. Money was tight. But I scraped together my nickels and got tickets to a musical. Since Junior High, Renee has had a huge crush on Donny Osmond. And for Valentine's 1994, I was able to get tickets to see Donny Osmond starring in the Chicago production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. Taking Renee to see Donny Osmond won me lots of gold stars. But it was also a great play.

Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat is a musical adaptation of the story of Joseph, found towards the end of the book of Genesis. If you haven't seen it, there's a video version that just came out a few years later starring Donny Osmond himself. It's well worth seeing.

Of course, the other place to find the Joseph story is in the Bible itself. I'd encourage you to read the whole thing. It begins in the 37th chapter of Genesis and is only 10 or 12 pages long.

From a literary standpoint alone, it ranks as one of the great short stories of Western Literature. But there's also a tremendous spiritual point to the story.

I'm not going to try to tackle the entire story in this sermon. I preached about the entire saga of Joseph and his brothers a couple years ago.

But the quick synopsis is this. Joseph is a rather snotty 17-year-old with 10 older brothers. Their father, Jacob, had sired children with 4 different women. But Joseph's mother was Jacob's favorite wife, and thus Joseph becomes Jacob's favorite son. This creates jealousy amongst the 10 older brothers. To make matters worse, Joseph keeps having dreams which symbolically show his brothers bowing down before him. This doesn't earn him any brownie points with them either. Eventually the brothers get fed up. They sell Joseph into slavery, and then they fake his death and tell their father that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal.

Through a long series of events, Joseph goes from rags to riches. He goes from being a slave and then a prisoner all the way up to being Pharaoh's second-in-command.

But then there's a famine in the region. And Joseph's 10 older brothers come to Egypt wanting to buy food from Joseph. 20 years have elapsed since they sold Joseph into slavery. They don't recognize who Joseph is, but he knows them. And so Joseph takes advantage of his position of great power.

Joseph begins a rather elaborate testing procedure to see if his older brothers have changed. In the end, the bottom line is this. They are now willing to defend Benjamin, their youngest brother. They're willing to sacrifice on his behalf. And they show tremendous sorrow and repentance about the way they had treated Joseph in the past.

Which brings us to our OT lesson today from Genesis 45, which is the climax of the story. Appropriately it's also the emotional climax of the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. It is at this moment that Joseph reveals himself.

In the musical the Narrator sings,

*Joseph knew by this his brothers now were honest men
The time had come at last to reunite them all again*

In the 45th chapter of Genesis, Joseph is overcome with emotion, and he sends all of the Egyptians entourage out of the room. He's so moved that he begins to weep. And then our lesson today begins with Joseph dropping the bombshell. He says, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?"

Or as he sings in the musical,
*Can't you recognize my face? Is it hard to see
That Joseph, who you thought was dead, your brother
It's me?*

And then there's the great line in Genesis: "But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence."¹

Now, put yourself in the brothers' place for a few moments. They sold Joseph into slavery when he was a teenager. They'd written him off as gone. But in the meantime, they had been feeling guilty about what they had done. They saw the trauma it caused their father. They later felt that God was punishing them for what they had done to Joseph. So there's one whole set of emotions: relief, excitement, joy. Their brother was alive.

But then, there had to be a different second set of emotions. Joseph was alive. But they had sold him into slavery. And now he was the second most powerful person in the most powerful nation on earth. He could have them executed with a snap of his fingers.

And Joseph had a lot to be angry about. He spent 13 years as a slave and a prisoner. He hadn't seen his beloved father in over 20 years. So for the brothers, some questions have to be hanging there. Is Joseph mad at us? What will he do to us? So in addition to relief and excitement and joy, there also had to be a strong sense of apprehension, and fear, and dread. How is Joseph going to respond?

Joseph says, "Come closer to me." That distance, that break in their relationship is still there. And Joseph is seeking to heal it. He says, "Come closer."

Then he says "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt."²

Notice the words there. Joseph is not denying what his brothers have done. It was a horrible thing. Joseph is naming it, and not sweeping it under the rug. He's acknowledging their sin honestly. But Joseph also brings a message of forgiveness.

He says, "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."³ The message is amazing. Joseph is telling them, in essence what he says later in ch50: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve numerous people". In other words, "You've done

¹ Gen 45:3

² Gen 45:4

³ Gen 45:5

something evil, but God has taken it and made something good come of it. You may have sold me into slavery in Egypt, but God has turned things around so that now, in spite of your evil actions, you and our whole family will be saved.

And not only that, God is going to save lots of Egyptians from starvation also.' He sums it up by saying: "So it was not you who sent me here, but God."⁴ In other words, Joseph is saying that God took the worst his brothers could dish out and brought something good out of it.

Joseph could easily have acted with vengeance. He had almost total earthly power. But his earthly power could not heal his broken relationships with his brothers. Instead, it took giving up that earthly power, sending his entourage out, and being open and vulnerable with his brothers. In doing so, Joseph is acting in a very Christ-like way.

And in doing so, the breach is healed. We're told that "he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him."⁵

Life can be hard. Oftentimes, we're beset by troubles we don't deserve. Certainly, that's the case with Joseph. He had been dealt some terrible blows. Sold into slavery. Separated from those he loved. But looking back prayerfully, he saw the hand of God at work in his life.

We don't always know what God intends. We don't always get to see the big picture. Life can be overwhelming at times.

What can we do? We can do what Joseph did. We can put our trust in God. God can bring good out of the worst of circumstances. God's goodness is stronger than any evil that might beset us.

The choice is ours. We can bear grudges against our enemies or against our families. We can nurse our anger. We can react to all the problems that life brings and say, "Why me?"

Or we can be a people of forgiveness, not forgetting the bad things that people do, but not dwelling on them either. We can be a people of faith: "You meant to harm me, but God intended it for good."

Ultimately, it means that we are called to do the things Jesus told us to do in our Gospel lesson: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."⁶ And then he adds, "Forgive, and you will be forgiven."⁷

That's what we saw Joseph doing. That's what Jesus call us to do as well.

We live in a broken and troubled and strife filled world. Life can be messy, and life can be tragic at times.

⁴ Gen 45:8

⁵ Gen 45:15

⁶ Lk 6:27-28

⁷ Lk 6:37

And in the midst of that the troubling realities of our world, Jesus says something challenging. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you... Forgive, and you will be forgiven."

What Jesus is telling us is often on a collision course with the way we usually operate, with the way we usually think. And I guarantee you this is not easy.

"Love your enemy." How do you do that? I would offer two thoughts.

First of all, loving people who have done wrong does not mean exempting them from justice. The law at its best protects the innocent and punishes the guilty, and it should be used. Loving someone does not mean giving them a magical "get out of jail free" card.

And yes, sometimes people are able to offer forgiveness to those who wronged them. Several years ago in the church shooting in Charleston, the families of the victims were able to offer forgiveness to the shooter. That's a remarkable thing to do. It speaks to the depths of their level of faith.

But that didn't exempt the shooter from facing the criminal charges for his actions. Yes, Jesus asks us to love our enemies. But that doesn't exempt them from facing the consequences of their actions.

But secondly, and perhaps more importantly, is the second part of Jesus statement. "Love your enemies... and pray for those who mistreat you."

Pray for your enemies. Sometimes, it's easier to do this second thing, to pray for our enemies, before we grow able to do the first thing, to love our enemies.

Sometimes the best way to start to love someone who has wronged you is to pray for them, to ask God to turn their hearts, to ask God to forgive them. Even before we are able to forgive our enemies ourselves, we can ask God to forgive them. That can be an important first step.

And maybe, just maybe, we can begin to learn how we might be able to love them. It's certainly not easy. But it's what God would have us do.

Forgive, and you will be forgiven. That's what we saw Joseph doing. That's what Jesus calls us to do as well.