

Okay, so this passage that you just heard really needs some context.

It makes hopelessly little sense without understanding the larger narrative that it's a part of.

This story comes from the book of Genesis, and it's about Jacob and his 12 sons.

The second-youngest son is named Joseph, and he's the main character in this story.

You may have heard of or seen the musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

It is campy and doesn't take some creative license, but on the whole, it's about Joseph's life.

I confess, that's how I know this story so well.

So, the passage that we heard is towards the end of Joseph's life, after much of the drama has occurred.

You see, Joseph was his father, Jacob's, favorite son.

Jacob doted on him and spoiled him, and Joseph was really pompous about the whole thing.

This made Joseph's brothers angry and jealous and they wanted to get rid of him.

At first, they conspired to kill him, but then one of his brothers, Judah, is like wait a minute, we can make money off of him! So instead of killing him, they sold him into slavery and he was carted off to Egypt.

They take his beloved coat that their father gave to him, they dip it in goat's blood and tell their father that Joseph was killed by a wild animal.

So, Jacob goes for many years thinking his beloved son is dead.

Fast forward a while, and Joseph has risen the ranks from slave to right-hand man of Pharaoh!

You could say that he's kind of like the Secretary of Agriculture.

He oversees all the farming.

Egypt is a fertile place because the Nile runs right through it, making it ideal growing ground.

They have plenty of food.

Meanwhile, his brothers and father are back in Canaan and they're starving because they're experiencing a great famine.

Jacob sends all of his sons, except for his youngest son Benjamin, to Egypt, to try to get grain and bring it back to Canaan.

They, of course, have to go to Joseph and ask for food.

They haven't seen him in years, and Joseph immediately knows who they are but he doesn't reveal himself to them.

Instead, he plays a twisted game of cat and mouse and sort of tests their loyalties.

Joseph accuses them of being spies and throws all of them into prison for 3 days.

Then, he holds onto one of them, Simeon, as collateral, but he sends the rest back to Canaan with sacks full of grain and the money they gave him to pay for it.

So, he's being kind, gave them money and grain, but he still detained one of the brothers, because his condition was that they had to return with their youngest brother, Benjamin, and so Joseph kept Simeon locked up to ensure that they'd come back with Benjamin.

Finally, the brothers come back with Benjamin, and Joseph treats them to an elaborate feast.

All seems well, but then Joseph does something else that's twisted.

He frames Benjamin.

He tells one of his servants to put his silver cup into Benjamin's sack of grain, then Joseph sends all the brothers back to Canaan with their money and their grain.

But while they're travelling, Joseph tells one of his servants to overtake them, tell them the cup is missing, and search their belongings.

Sure enough, it's in Benjamin's sack and Joseph's servant arrests him.

Then they all go back to Joseph in Egypt.

Judah, another brother, pleads with Joseph to release Benjamin.

He explains that their father, Jacob, has lost his favorite son, Joseph, and if he loses his second-favorite son, Benjamin, then his heart will never recover, and he will die.

NOW we hear the passage that we heard read this morning.

It is at this point that Joseph feels so badly for his father, that he decides to reveal himself and tell the brothers that it's actually him, it's Joseph.

I can only imagine the flood of emotions that the brothers must be feeling here- confusion, guilt, anger, betrayal, relief?

Joseph, for his part, is apparently still as pompous as he was when he was young.

He doesn't apologize for lying to them and concealing his identity and for framing Benjamin, no, he says, *"And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."* (45:5).

No, there's no reason to be upset, God sent me ahead of you to protect you, is Joseph's claim.

If Joseph thinks that all of his twists and lies are part of God's plan, then I think he is sorely mistaken.

I can't tell who is worse here, the 11 brothers who conspire to kill Joseph and then end up selling him into slavery, and lie to their father about it, or Joseph, the one who rises in power and then deceives his family, hides his identity, and through it all, ends up arresting two of his brothers.

None of them are shining examples of integrity.

But there is one person in all of this who gets overlooked, someone who does have something to teach us about compassion and forgiveness!

It's their father, Jacob!

After what those twelve sons did, I might have wanted to disown them all.

They faked Joseph's death and allowed their father to grieve for years, thinking he was dead.

Then Joseph arrested two of them and refused to tell them who he was, again, scaring their father into thinking he might lose two more of his beloved sons.

Now, Jacob didn't live a perfect life, for those of you who are familiar with his relationship with his brother Esau and their father, Isaac.

But that's a sermon for another time.

While he wasn't a perfect person, we have a lot to learn from the way he relates to his sons after he learns of their betrayal.

Jacob forgave everyone.

In fact, he *blessed* them, individually, with a powerful and personal blessing, you can read them all in Genesis 49.

After that, he told them that he was going to be gathered with his people and that he wanted to be buried with their ancestors in Canaan, where Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebekah and one of his wives, Leah was buried.

“When Jacob ended his charge to his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.”
(Genesis 49:33)

With all the betrayal and heartbreak that take place in this story, it really has a beautiful ending.

All the brothers are reconciled to each other and Jacob reconciles with all of them as well.

They all live prosperously in Egypt and they bury Jacob in Canaan, per his request.

There’s no unfinished business.

What lies at the heart of all this reconciliation, is forgiveness.

Joseph forgives his brothers for what they did to him, they forgive him for lying to them and misleading them, and Jacob forgives all of them for the years of lies that they put him through.

This story reminds us that no group of people is perfect, whether church family or nuclear family or group of friends, anytime you get a group of people together, the possibility of betrayal and hurt coexist with the possibility for joy, love and belonging.

This is the danger, the risk, of relationships.

People can hurt us.

But Jacob reminds us that the bonds that keep us tethered are more important than the wedges that we drive between ourselves.

I imagine people have done things to you that you have deemed, 'unforgivable.'

But when we stay in that hurt, angry and resentful place, eventually, we're punishing ourselves.

As I told the children, we're just wasting our energy clutching onto those tight fists, unable to be loving or gracious to that person, because we're so busy keeping our fists clenched.

But when you unclench them, when you let go of the anger or the betrayal, you're choosing not to allow that person to have power or control over you anymore.

You're consciously choosing the path which will lead you to freedom and grace and the ability to love freely once again.

And let me be clear that forgiving someone does not necessarily excuse their behavior.

It doesn't pardon them, it doesn't let them off the hook for legal consequences, forgiveness doesn't condone behavior.

Forgiveness simply means that I am not going to allow the anger I have for you, to control my life, anymore.

Jacob could have died angry at his sons, but what purpose would that have served?

As someone who has worked with a lot of people near death, and many families after a death, nobody is ever glad that they hung onto that grudge or that they didn't pick up the phone.

Nobody is ever happy that they withheld forgiveness.

I know, forgiveness can be hard, and it can take years where we get to a place where we're finally ready to let go of the pain someone has caused us.

But when we get there, we'll find that forgiveness is truly a gift that we give to ourselves.

Amen.