

Forgiveness
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Genesis 45:3-11, 15
Luke 6:27-38

How many of you have ever experienced the fake problem of the empty fridge? In other words, you, or a teenager in your home, or some other hungry person in your kitchen, hovers over the open refrigerator door, with the light and cold air spilling across their face, and announces, “I’m hungry but there’s nothing here to eat.”

In this scenario, it’s a fake problem of an empty fridge; while some people literally have an empty fridge with nothing to eat, this fridge has some mushrooms, a bell pepper, and some ground beef. There’s also half an onion in a tupperware, and some cans of crushed tomatoes, and a lonely bulb of garlic hiding at the bottom of the bowl of fruit. What do you think can be eaten– that is, if someone knows how and is willing to do the work?

Yes, you could make spaghetti sauce. But perhaps the hungry person staring into the fridge does not know how to chop vegetables or find the right seasoning, or maybe they are used to someone else who always makes a meal for them, presented in its complete form so that they can consume it and feel full.

Anna Carter Florence, who teaches Preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary, says that Christians often approach the Bible like a fake- empty fridge. We look into it, and we expect to find something ready-made, that will instantly satisfy and feel good. Preachers, then, are expected to be the cooks– to grab the parts of scripture no one knows what to do with, mix them together, and add their own seasoning, and serve them at just the right temperature.

The problem with this expectation is that then, Christians in the pew are waiting to be fed, week to week, but they are not finding the ingredients of their own lives to add to the recipes, and most importantly they are not learning how to find food when they hunger the most.

Today our scriptures offer ingredients for a more loving, grace-filled life. However, the main ingredient offered here: Forgiveness– is not one we reach for first. Let’s see what we can do with this. Jesus, in his Sermon on the Plain, offers instruction for forgiveness and mercy. In Genesis, Joseph’s generous forgiveness of his brothers, provides a model for forgiveness.

Joseph’s story is like the picture of a finished recipe in Bon Appetit magazine, an image that is glossy and mouth-watering to look at, but you can’t imagine making that happen yourself. None of us would want to go through what Joseph went through before he got to this place of being able to forgive his brothers. His story is a whole novella that takes place within the book of Genesis. First, his elder brothers– jealous that their father had favored him and given him a

precious coat of many colors, threw him into a pit, then sold him off as a slave to Egypt. They dipped Joseph's robe in goat's blood and presented it to their father Jacob, who wept believing his favorite son had been killed.

Once in Egypt, Joseph worked as an enslaved man, but everything he did God blessed. And so, he rose in power, becoming an overseer of much fortune. Then, he was imprisoned under false charges. Still, he gained a reputation for being a skilled dream interpreter, and news of his gift got to Pharaoh. Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams, and predicted that the land would have 7 years of plenty, and 7 years of famine. Therefore, Joseph instructed Pharaoh to carefully preserve food during the time of plenty, so that the people would have enough to eat during the coming time of famine. Pharaoh appointed Joseph as his lead advisor, and gave him an Egyptian name, Zaphenath-paneah; and an Egyptian wife, Asenath.

It turns out that the famine did not just affect Egypt. Way back in Canaan, the land of his brothers, people were starving, too. And so their father Jacob sent the brothers to Egypt in search of food.

What we have as our lectionary scripture looks like a neat little paragraph about forgiveness. But if you read the whole novella, you'll see that before he reveals himself to his brothers, Joseph puts them through a number of tests. He wants to see, are these the same brothers who threw a boy into a pit and then sold him into slavery? Or, have these men become better versions of themselves, shed of any selfish intentions? Joseph's tests aimed to prove their love and loyalty for family, their trustworthiness, and the depth of their repentance. The scripture tells of Joseph going through a wide range of emotions: anger, suspicion, loud weeping, and finally: generous, loving, grace-filled forgiveness.

They say that revenge is a meal best served cold. The cold, ready-to-eat things in my fridge right now are sliced cheese, some yogurt cups of flavors that Kai liked last month but not this month, half a bag of some baby carrots, and some chocolate hummus that I thought was a good idea, until it wasn't, but I just haven't thrown it out yet. Any of these would be fine... for a snack. But I would likely find myself peering again into the fridge in another hour.

As for Joseph, upon the return of his brothers— and remember, this was during the years of a famine throughout the land— Joseph had his steward slaughter an *entire animal* and served his family a feast. Maybe forgiveness is the meal that requires a careful combination of ingredients, time for marination, preparation in the warm oven of tenderness, and served in hot abundance.

Jesus said these words: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. Jesus' instructions are not about putting yourself back into a place where you can be abused again. Instead, he is showing us that we have the ingredients to make ourselves powerful, even in the face of those who have done us harm. These ingredients: they are a grace.

A preacher may be able to help tell you how to cook. But a preacher cannot tell you what the source of your hunger is. So now I invite you to have a conversation with yourself: what broken relationships have left you feeling empty? Where do you hunger for healing?

We hear of Ukraine and Russia on the brink of war, and somehow the US is right in the middle of that. We know that disagreements over how we approach a pandemic have festered over 2 years, and are erupting everywhere from local school boards to the Canadian border, to a mental health crisis for a generation of children and youth. We have failed so miserably in talking about racism that we are too nervous to speak words of care for hurting groups out of fear of saying the wrong thing. Instead of working to find meaningful ways to address this hurt, we have resorted to banning talk of it at all in classrooms across the country.

And what of our own friendships, our own families, our own households? What are we holding on to because we do not want or know how to pull together the ingredients for healing or release? In what ways are old grudges and wounds holding us back, keeping us awake at night, or even making us literally sick?

Forgiveness— both giving it, and asking it— is very risky. Riskier than trying an ambitious new recipe for the first time at a meal that really matters. It's a gamble. You could make a fool of yourself. And, let me be clear: Jesus is not asking us to put ourselves up on a butcher block to be destroyed by abusers again and again. There are some people you simply cannot trust with a clean slate.

But where does that leave us when we have been wronged? When we harbor our resentments, we can become like one who has left spoiled meat in the fridge drawer. You meant to do something with it after you first brought it home— cook it, and make it into something that can be nourishing. But instead you tried to forget it was there. You reached for other things. You know it's still there, and yet you pretend it's not. You don't want to deal with the stench of it when you remove it. The trouble is, you know what will happen. Pretty soon it will make all the ingredients in your fridge smell rancid. Sometimes forgiveness is removing that which is harmful from our lives so that all that remains can have a chance at becoming something good and nourishing.

It may feel safer to stick to known recipes: to love those who love you. To do good to those who are good to you. To lend to those you know will pay you back in a timely manner. But Jesus says, there's no grace in that. The Greek word used here— *charis*— gets translated as credit, but it really means gift. And we think of forgiveness as a gift to the one who has wronged us, the one *receiving* forgiveness. But I wonder, maybe forgiveness is also meant to be a gift to the one who has been wronged, but we just keep passing it over, thinking it's something we don't want to use. If we dare to use it, though, we may discover it frees us and opens us up to mercy, to trust, and to love. This grace, this gift, brings us closer to the face of God. It is an act of faith in the transformation that God can call forth in any one of us, to bring us closer to the goodness for which we were made.

That is the foolishness of God's love. It is so abundant. It doesn't follow the logical order of things. And if we are willing to work with it as an ingredient, we can be surprised and delighted by the feast we may make.