

“Mercy Me! It’s Not Over Yet...”

Genesis 45:1-16, 24-28

Genesis 46:29b-30

Genesis 50:5-23a

I had these friends who all rented a house together after we graduated from college. They called it PHAKBY house. I think, technically, six of them lived there, but the house was just a hive of activity with significant others, friends, friends of friends, and people that...well, no one was quite sure how or why they got there. But they had this innovation – a house rule – that I thought was, really, quite brilliant. You know how sometimes you say something and the instant, I mean the instant those words leave your mouth you think, “no, no, no ...I should not have said *that*.” Well, when that happened at PHAKBY house, you could just go FWIP – like you’re sucking those words back into your mouth with a straw. “Who did your hair this morning?” FWIP. “Are you putting on a few pounds there?” FWIP. “Hey, train wreck, this isn’t your station!” FWIP. Whatever it was that you said, if you felt instant remorse – if, in your own mind, you understood exactly how hurtful what you said was and wanted to take it back, the other person allowed you to do just that. With one simple, FWIP, they all agreed that it was like your careless statement never happened.

With close friends, sometimes we’re able to give each other a break – to make nice and keep the peace. But we all know that when our relationships fracture and start to fall apart, a simple FWIP just isn’t going to cut it. One of the things that makes the story of Joseph’s life so remarkable is that it gives us a very real look at broken relationships. The lying and taunting, the bragging, the threats of violence, being sold into slavery, the tricks, the games – it’s all brought Joseph and his brothers to this moment. Joseph breaks down and tells his brothers who he is and he does it in weeping, streams of tears, wails and cries so loud that other Egyptians in the

household heard him crying. Joseph wants to know about his father, he wants to start to put things back together, to begin healing, to really reunite.

But this isn't the moment when the story is over. This isn't a thirty-minute sitcom with a happy ending. Joseph, weeping, opens his arms, and his brothers don't answer him – they can't answer him. They can't process his words quickly enough to even begin to believe what he's saying to them. The scripture says they, "couldn't answer him because they were so dismayed at standing in Joseph's presence." Dismayed isn't enough to give us the full sense of what these guys were feeling because this word means trembling inwardly. It means feeling a sudden shock and being disturbed by it. It can mean to be terrified and amazed all at the same time. The brothers couldn't speak because they were totally undone just seeing his face.

Joseph tries to draw them in, he calls them to come closer. He doesn't want them to be hurt or to grieve any more. He doesn't want them to burn with anger – not even to be angry at themselves. Joseph has made peace with being sold into Egypt because he sees God's hand in it: in the extraordinary preservation of life – in a single soul helping to sustain so many others. No matter what the brothers have done to him, Joseph sees God's hand more powerfully. So, he's ready to put things back together and he hugs his brothers and now everyone is crying and hugging and healing. He gets them all packed up to retrieve their father and the rest of the family. The music swells, the glowing sun sparkles in a perfect day style lens flare, and the camera fades to black.

But the story isn't over yet. Even as he has embraced them, even as he eagerly awaits the reunion with their father, Joseph says to his brothers, "don't quarrel along the way." In this one line, we see the cracks in the glue of their reconciliation. Quarreling here basically means shaking with a violent emotion, but especially anger or fear. Don't quarrel means – I still don't

trust you. Don't quarrel means that Joseph's fear is coming through his hopes of healing. "What if you're still who you used to be? What if you're the same hotheads and violent idiots who betrayed me and hurt me?" They sold him into slavery when he was 17 years old and now he's probably in his early 40's. Have they grown in 20+ years or are they still a threat?

The story isn't over yet. They have to learn how to live together, to painstakingly reestablish trust. To hold out hope for growth and to be compassionate when any of them messes up. For another twenty or so years, they live in the same country again, slowly rebuilding, when one day their father Israel dies. Even after twenty years together, the brothers are thrown into a panic. Their guilt roars loudly in their ears – all the work they've done to make peace seems to melt away as they face this terrifying thought: what would happen to us if Joseph still carries a grudge against us? What if the last twenty years were a bit of a show to make Dad happy and now that he's gone, Joseph will come for us? What if Joseph really does still hate us and we are truly lost?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that, "there is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared." The brothers didn't want to risk their new lives, their bountiful pasturelands, their new home on the chance that Joseph didn't really love and forgive them. So they lied. They lied big and, honestly, really, really inappropriately. They literally just got home from their father's funeral and they put words in their father's mouth to try to guilt trip Joseph into living in peace with them. This is not daring peace – it's cruel and disrespectful and, well, mean.

But it also shows us that the brothers never really believed in the peace that Joseph offered them. Joseph was wary and the brothers were locked in their guilt. They couldn't receive forgiveness because they could never forgive themselves. The words that they put in their

father's mouth really bear this out: "forgive the crime of your brothers and the sins they committed against you. There were wrong to treat you so badly." Joseph's brothers knew that they sinned, that they rebelled against God, that they hurt Joseph and themselves. They finally, openly say to him that what they did was evil and they pin their hopes on his compassion. Maybe they believe that if he forgives them just one more time that they will finally be able to feel free from their guilt.

Joseph heard all of these words and he wept. Honestly, I think he was weeping for them because he never imagined that they were still holding on to all of these old wounds. He thought that they were reconciled – he thought that there was trust and that healing was accomplished. Joseph tries once more to give them some relief and some hope. He tells them, "do not be afraid. Am I to judge instead of God? ... Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it only for good, and through me, God preserved the lives of countless people as God is still doing today." Joseph consoled them and he kept on speaking to their hearts.

It's hard not to be impatient when we're restoring broken relationships. It takes so long not to look into that person's face and see all the wrongs they've ever done to you. It takes so long not to see our own sin and guilt reflected back to us from the pain in their eyes. But true reconciliation requires a patient heart – one that is willing to continue speaking words of love, one that shows up as long as healing work can be done. We cannot rush the process – we cannot make someone else ready to move forward. Sometimes we have to walk away until the other person is ready. Sometimes they never are ready. But we, we can be open – we can believe in the possibility of reconciliation and then live into that reality.

When we think about mercy, I think we often focus in on moments of intense pain or danger. We think of wrestling and someone needing to tap out because they can't take it any

more – crying “uncle” because the pain is too much. Or we think about someone who may face massive jailtime standing before a judge, throwing themselves on the mercy of the court. In the Bible, though, this isn’t really what mercy is all about. The word in Hebrew stems from a word that means “womb.” To show compassion and mercy, to love tenderly is related to the selfless love of a woman growing new life, protecting it, caring for it all the time, regardless of circumstances, with all of her being. If we think about mercy in this way, we see that it is not meant to apply only in extreme situation. Mercy is the small, daily acts that make up our relationships. Reconciling with one another doesn’t come so much from our grand, showy gestures. It comes from our intentional efforts, forged in love and grace, continuing over time. It comes from daring to open our hearts to new paths of peace.

Please pray with me: Holy God, maker of peace – you teach us mercy in every breath we take. Let us put down our burdens of guilt and trust in your love and forgiveness. Help us to extend your mercy to one another, to be patient, and to share your grace where it is needed most. Let our hearts shine so bright that hearts around us start to glow. Amen.