After describing creation and the beginning of humankind, the book of Genesis goes on to describe the beginnings of the nation of Israel with the stories of

- Abraham and Sarah;
- their son Isaac;
- his twin sons Esau and Jacob; and
- Jacob’s twelve sons who become the founders of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Now this family is not your typical Norman Rockwell type of family. Somehow Abraham gets it into his head that like the gods of his neighbors, his God wants him to sacrifice his son Isaac. At the last second God intervenes, and Isaac lives to father twin boys, Esau and Jacob. When they are young men, Jacob tricks his brother Esau out of his inheritance which causes a family quarrel that only miles and miles and years and years can mend. Not surprisingly Jacob and his twelve sons have their troubles as well. Listen now for God’s word to us.

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Someone once described Genesis as the saga of one big dysfunctional family. How is it with your family and mine? Next Thursday is Thanksgiving where many families will come from east and west, north and south to gather for a Thanksgiving meal. Will there be some empty chairs at our tables because some have declined to come or weren’t invited? Will there be

- some awkward greetings;
- some polite, but strained conversations;
- some carefully planned seating arrangements;
- some lively two-steps to keep from opening old wounds, and unresolved differences?

Just last week Nan Clarke overheard a woman in a store say, “I hate Thanksgiving! It’s not the dinner. It’s the family.”

Ann Lamott in her book, Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith, writes this about her family:

“I adore these people. I have also had fights with some of them over the years, have said terrible things, have been accused by one of great wrongs, and told I would never be forgiven. We’ve had the usual problems: failed marriages, rehab, old resentments, miserable, lumpy family secrets, harshness and intensity….We’re just another motley American family enduring.” (pages 235 and 236)

Could these words or something like them be used to describe your family or mine?
Ann Lamott’s description of her family is very tame compared to the dynamics in Jacob’s family. However, as we know, chapter 37 isn’t the end to the story. By God’s grace and a series of unexpected events, Joseph rises from his slavery in Egypt to become Pharaoh’s minister of agriculture in charge of distributing food during a seven year famine. This famine is so severe that it engulfs the whole Middle East including Jacob and his eleven remaining sons. Listen to what happens next.

(Please read Genesis 42:1-3)

The unexpected arrival of his brothers in Egypt is what Joseph has been dreaming about for years: the chance to get even, to settle the score. However, through a series of meetings where his brothers still have no idea with whom they are dealing, Joseph discovers to his surprise that he is homesick. Joseph discovers that he is now confronted with a choice between his delicious desire for vengeance and his longing to be part of a family again. Listen to what he chooses.

(Please read Genesis 45:1-11 and 15)

Episcopal priest and seminary professor, Barbara Brown Taylor, says that this story of Joseph and his eleven brothers is the most satisfying tale in all of Hebrew Scripture. (Gospel Medicine, page 115) It’s satisfying because it begins so tragically and ends so full of hope. It’s satisfying because it begins with a broken family and ends with that family being reconciled and reunited. It’s satisfying because of all of the positive changes that occur. It’s satisfying because it gives us hope that you and I and our families can change, be reconciled, and made whole again.

Notice: everybody in this family has some responsibility for this quarrel. Jacob starts it with his favoritism toward Joseph; Joseph exploits this favoritism with his arrogance; and the other eleven brothers inflame this quarrel with their jealousy, hatred, and greed; and this is usually the way it is with most disagreements and quarrels. There is enough blame for everyone.

Also notice: It takes one, just one
  to break the ice;
  to begin the healing;
  to initiate the reconciling;
  to start the forgiving.

Notice as well: the one, who is certainly not without blame, but the one who has been wronged the most, the one who has the most reason to be angry and unforgiving, is the one who starts the forgiving.

I’d like to suggest four reasons why you and I may want to follow Joseph’s example and be the one in our family
  to break the ice;
  to begin the healing;
to initiate the reconciling;
to start the forgiving.

Reason number one: God asks us to forgive. “Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful,” says Jesus. (Luke 6:36) Elsewhere Jesus teaches, “Forgive seventy times seven.” (Matthew 18:22) God asks you and me to forgive.

Reason number two: “We reap what we sow.” (2 Corinthians 9:6) Hatred and vengeance are like boomerangs. They always, always come back to hurt us and to poison our own souls. When we hate and refuse to forgive we become hateful, unforgiving people. “We reap what we sow.”

Reason number three: We all need to be forgiven. A man once said, “I never forgive.” His friend replied, “Then I hope you never sin.” Don’t we all sin? We may not have been the one to cause this particular family quarrel, but haven’t we all initiated many quarrels at other times with other people in our desire to get our own way?

How many times have you and I prayed, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” (Matthew 6:12) We all need to be forgiven and the more we realize just how much we have been forgiven already by God and others, the more forgiving you and I will be.

Reason number four: Vengeance is sweet. Let’s admit it, vengeance is sweet, but a reconciled, reunited family is sweeter. Certainly there are times when you and I have every right to confront, to accuse, to withdraw, to punish until

- a hurt is acknowledged;
- an apology is given;
- a wrong is righted.

However, sometimes we have to choose between the seductive temptation to get even and family. Sometimes we have to choose between holding on to our hurt feelings and family. Sometimes we have to choose between our sense of fairness and justice and family. Joseph chooses his family and he isn’t sorry. Almost always this is the right choice for you and me as well.

However, as we all know, forgiving someone is easier said than done. So I want to suggest four things you and I can do to make these four reasons to be forgiving a reality in our families.

First, let’s pray every day for the person or persons who have hurt, upset, and wronged us. I can remember being upset with a colleague at work in a former church which I served. I began praying for him by saying, “Lord, help him to see how wrong he is. Come to him and help him to change.” Now I didn’t pray this just once, but day after day, until over time a surprising thing happened. I was the one who began to change.
Henry Drummond says, “Ten minutes spent in Christ’s presence every day; Aye, two minutes if it be face to face and heart to heart will make your whole heart different.” Prayer changes people, and the one who is usually changed the most is the one who does the praying, because the longer we pray for someone, the more we are in Christ’s presence… and the more we are in Christ’s presence, the harder it is to be hateful, angry, and unforgiving. Let’s pray for the person or persons from whom we are estranged.

Secondly, in these prayers let’s ask God to help us to forgive them. We all know from experience that forgiveness is very difficult. However, God never asks us to do anything without also promising to help us to do it. So let’s ask God to help us to let go of our hurts; to surrender our vengeful feelings; to give up our right to get even.

Remember what Jesus prays from his cross. “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34) Now if Jesus could say that prayer for those who were crucifying him, then surely he can and will help us to pray and do the same thing with our families. So, let’s ask.

Thirdly, it’s helpful to remember that forgiveness is a process. Often forgiveness takes time. Most family quarrels don’t erupt suddenly from nowhere, but are the result of slights, hurts, patterns of behavior over a long period of time. Just as a quarrel takes time to develop, the reconciliation of this quarrel most likely also will take time, several attempts, two steps forward and one step backward. Joseph himself doesn’t forgive immediately. That’s because forgiveness is a process. So let’s give God, ourselves, and others time, patience and persistence, and the benefit of the doubt.

Finally, it’s helpful to realize that not all family quarrels end as happily as Joseph’s does. If we have sincerely done all we can to forgive another family member, not once, but many times, and the response is disappointing, it’s not helpful to feel guilty. Often I think we take too much blame as well as too much credit. Even Jesus wasn’t able to reach everyone, transform every situation. Some situations we just have to accept. Just as God will help us to forgive and to reconcile, God also will help us to live with our disappointment if the reconciliation never happens.

While some families are more broken and dysfunctional than others, almost all families have their struggles, their problems and tensions, their hurts and disappointments. While this is not ideal, neither is it tragic. This is just part of our human condition. What is tragic is when we see no way and no hope for this to change.

The central message of this Joseph story is something Joseph says more than once to his brothers. “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it
(and used it) for good.” (Genesis 50:20) If God can change evil into good, transform a family quarrel into a family reunion, convert a cross into a resurrection, then surely, surely God and us together can do something good with whatever family situation we’re facing right now. This is the good news. This is our hope. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:
Lord, thank you for reminding us today that we are your children, brothers and sisters to each other. Thank you for helping us to live, forgive, and love so this may be a reality beginning with our own family. Amen.