



***Theme: 70 x 7 – The Road to Forgiveness***

***“What is Forgiveness Anyway?”***

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber, January 7-8, 2023, at Summit Church, Durango

**Weekly Memory Verse:**

***<sup>20</sup> You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. –***  
Genesis 50:20a

**VIDEO      Forgiveness Sermon Bumper**

**SLIDE      “What is Forgiveness Anyway?”**

On Wednesday we had our monthly staff meeting where we hand out the good bird and the dirty bird. We nominate others for the good bird, celebrating all the great things we see our teammates do the past month, then we select the person to keep the bird for the month. The dirty bird you can only nominate yourself for, sharing any mistake or mess up you made so we can all laugh together because we all make mistakes and do silly things. I nominated myself for the dirty bird because I spent Monday cleaning out 30 plus years of files and redoing my office. I filled up 5 boxes of old papers, and one of things I found was this file folder with phone messages I was supposed to return in 2004!

To be fair, we moved my office that year from the church to the house next door as we did a major remodel and build out new offices,

classrooms, and atrium complex. I put these messages in a folder so I wouldn't lose them, but somehow they still got buried in all the moving of offices. I felt horrible as I opened the file and decided to call the three people and apologize almost 20 years later! The good news is that they all understood and laughed and said they forgive me.

While that's a silly example, it drives home the reason we are launching this new series of messages on forgiveness. Research from the mental health fields has discovered a connecting between pain and hurt and past wounds to depression, anxiety, cancer, and early death. We have discovered that more people die early from holding onto resentment and bitterness, and what that does to our bodies, than from cancer or even car accidents! We are literally killing ourselves by not learning how to forgive.

Jesus understood this as he spoke forgiveness more than any other topic except money. We find more than 125 passages about forgiveness in our New Testament and several hundred in the Hebrew Bible, or your Old Testament. There is story after story of how our God is one of forgiveness and how we are called to live as forgiving people. This past summer my wife Tami and I were invited to attend the International Conference of Agape Love and Forgiveness put on by the International Forgiveness Institute at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. The leader of that Institute is Dr. Robert Enright, a licensed psychologist and professor of Educational Psychology at UW. I was able to interview Bob this past week and we'll hear directly from him throughout this series of messages. We have purchased his latest book for us to read together and we'll use this in our small groups and they are available for only 10 dollars in the back of our Sanctuary.

## **GRAPHIC            8 Keys to Forgiveness**

I believe this may be one of the most important things we do this year and will be key to any of us living happier and more fulfilling lives as we enter a New Year. One of our church members, Jonathan Little,

introduced me to Dr. Enright and his research. Jonathan met Dr. Enright a number of years ago because of his own experience of what seeing firsthand in his family what happens when we carry grudges and unforgiveness in our hearts. He was kind enough to sit down with me this week and share his story.

### **VIDEO      Jonathan Little shares about his grandfather**

Have you ever witnessed something like this in your life? Do you have something you are carrying with you that it's time to let go of? There is no better place to wrestle with this idea of forgiveness and understand what it is and what it is not, than with the story of Joseph. The story of Joseph takes up the last 13 chapters of the book of Genesis and his family could've kept a group of therapists busy, full time for the rest of their lives. This is a powerful story in the Scriptures because it is the **first time, we find the word "forgiveness" mentioned in the Bible.** This story is going to teach us something about what forgiveness is, how we can learn to forgive, and what God can do with the pain that we cause one another, even in our families.

### **GRAPHIC      Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat - Donny Osmond**

Let's begin by remembering the story of Joseph, who was made famous in the musical, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." And yes, that is Donny Osmond playing Joseph in 1999! Forgive me!

### **GRAPHIC      Lineage from Abraham to Jesus**

It's helpful to remember that Joseph's great-grandfather was Abraham, and his great-grandmother was Sarah. Sarah was unable to have children early in life and so she gave her handmaiden Hagar to her husband Abraham so they could have a child and they had Ishmael. Sarah and Abraham conceived a child later in life which was Isaac. Isaac married Rebecca and they had twin boys, Jacob, and Esau.

## **GRAPHIC**

### **Lineage from Jacob to Joseph**

Jacob later would be given the name Israel. He had four wives, Bilhah, Zilpah, Rachel, and Leah, and he fathered 13 children, the second youngest of which was Joseph, whose mother was Rachel. Jacob fell in love with a beautiful woman named Rachel and wanted to marry her, so he paid the dowry to her father, but he then was tricked on his wedding night into marrying the older sister, Leah. Can you imagine how confusing that must be to wake up after your wedding day with the wrong woman lying next to you in bed? I still am not sure how he did not notice that he had married the wrong sister, but it makes some of the mistakes we make in our families pale in comparison.

Rachel's father did have a plan and he was willing to give Rachel to Jacob in marriage if he would just work a little bit longer and pay a little bit more dowry, which he did. Jacob married both Rachel and Leah, one of whom he loved and one of whom he really didn't. Leah did have one advantage and that is that she could have children while Rachel struggled to get pregnant. Leah discovered this was a way to please her husband and hopefully garner his love and they have several children together. Not to be outdone by her sister, Rachel then gives Jacob her maidservant and he has children with her. The competition is not complete because Leah then gives Jacob her maidservant and he has more children with her.

Rachel finally has biological children, and, in the end, Jacob ends up with four wives and 13 children. Talk about a confused mess! What do you think it was like to grow up in that family? This group might be the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith, but their families were not perfect, and we shouldn't forget that. Jacob, or Israel, continues his family tradition and he has a favorite child out of his 13 and it was Joseph who was the first son by his wife Rachel, the woman he loved most.

Jacob learned about having favorites from his parents who

learned it from their parents. Do you see how that works? We do have family patterns that we repeat if we don't pay attention to them. We simply fall into those patterns. In the Scriptures we talk about the sins of the parents being passed on to the sins of the children. An interesting side note is that it takes three generations for a chemical addiction to work its way out of a family genetically. It is eventually Joseph, at the tail end of those three generations, who begins to live life differently than his parents or grandparents or great-grandparents, and that happens because of his willingness to forgive. We are going to learn that forgiveness changes the entire family dynamic.

Joseph was told by his father during his entire growing up years that he was a special child. When all his siblings turned 16, they got the Ford Focus, while Joseph got the Mustang GTO with all the bells and whistles. It was a beautiful, multicolored robe which was made of very expensive fabric. Since he was treated that way, who could blame him for growing up feeling special? He didn't have the character to know that he should not tell people that he was special and so he proceeded to tell his brothers and anyone who would listen how wonderful he was in the eyes of his father. He never hesitated to tell his family that he was the favorite, which made his siblings feel about 2 inches tall. There was a lot of animosity in this household that created tension you could cut with a knife.

**Joseph begins to have dreams** that were given to him by God and one of those dreams is a vision of the future. It's the future he can't yet understand in which his brothers will bow down before him. He doesn't know what that means but he takes it to mean that he's pretty special and his brothers, not so much. He makes the mistake of telling his brothers about the dream which was not a very smart move for the youngest brother to be telling the oldest brothers they would bow down before him. **What older sibling wants to hear that?**

His brothers begin to think, "This really stinks. Our father doesn't really love us compared to Joseph. We're not sure if our moms even

love us. We do know that our dad loves one of us and it is Joseph, and he is so arrogant and full of himself that it's hard to take." Anger builds until they are out in the field one day and Joseph comes to see them. As he approaches, one of them says to the other, "This is the perfect time. Let's take out Joseph and kill him."

Can you believe that—a brother that would suggest killing his own brother over jealousy? It wouldn't be hard to believe if it hadn't happened earlier in the book of Genesis with Cain and Abel. We are meant to feel the confusion and the hate and the anger which has built up in this family and comes spilling out in the actions of the brothers. Fortunately, one of the other brothers says, "Let's not kill him. Look, there is a Midianite slave trading group coming through town, right over there. Maybe they will buy him from us. We can sell him and make some money and then we'll take his pretty coat and tear it to shreds and put goat's blood on it and tell dad that Joseph was eaten by wild animals. Not only do we make some money, but we get rid of Joseph at the same time. It's a win-win for all of us, except for Joseph!"

### **GRAPHIC            Joseph Being Sold into Slavery - Alexander Maximilian Seitz**

You see this scene depicted in this famous painting by Alexander Maximilian Seitz, which does a good job of depicting the scene because Joseph is only about 11 or 12 years old. Joseph will end up in Egypt where he will serve as a slave and then go to prison because he refuses to sleep with his owner's wife. All of this happens to him because his brothers betray him and sell him out because they are so angry. We don't know how long he was in Egypt as a slave, but it was at least 20 to 30 years and so we have decades of animosity and pain and hurt running through this family. When we consider the context, it's profound that this is the first biblical story to mention the word, **"forgiveness."**

At the end of our message today we will come back to this story

and see how it unfolds, but let's first get clear on what forgiveness is, and what it is not.

**SLIDE      Forgiveness is not saying, "I Forgive You."**

Dr. Enright does a great job of reminding us that we need to separate what forgiveness is vs. what happens when we forgive.

**SLIDE      "What forgiveness is" vs. "What happens when we forgive"**

Yes, forgiveness is good for us and changes our body and our hearts and our minds and our souls.

**SLIDE      Forgiveness is about extending goodness to those who have hurt us.**

We see this when Jesus looks from the cross at those who put him there and prays, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." Here's another way we have talked about forgiveness in our faith as followers of Jesus.

**SLIDE      Forgiveness is relinquishing the right to retaliation.**

Somebody has wronged us and when we are willing to let it go and we don't insist on getting even, we are offering forgiveness. One dimension of forgiveness is choosing inside of our hearts to let go and release the right to get even. Let's also be clear that forgiveness is not about saying that what someone did to us is okay, or that we should allow ourselves to keep being hurt.

**SLIDE      Forgiveness is NOT finding excuses for the offending person's behavior.**

Forgiveness is about offering the other person mercy and grace. It may not always be possible or feasible or safe to offer a pardon, but we must be willing to do go down this road or really forgiveness means nothing but simply empty words. We must be willing to let go and forgive because if we don't **it's like taking poison and hoping the other person gets sick**. We make ourselves sick, literally, when we hold onto



grudges and past hurts. We make ourselves bitter and cause ourselves pain and, in the process, we rob ourselves of life and give the other person power over us because of the wrong we feel they perpetuated upon us. We must forgive so we can heal and move on to experience life to the full.

### **SLIDE      Forgiveness is Not a Quick Formula We Can Follow**

One of the things Dr. Enright has found in his research is there is no easy fix when it comes to forgiveness. It's hard work and it takes practice and patience to develop a forgiving heart. I believe that's one of the reasons Jesus says these words in Matthew when it comes to forgiveness and are the anchor of this series of messages.

### **BIBLE**

**<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?"**

**<sup>22</sup> "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!"**

Jesus is using prophetic hyperbole to get our attention and make point, but he also is pointing to the fact that forgiveness takes time and is a process. I was shoveling snow this past week after the storms and it got me thinking about forgiveness. Why isn't my daughter, who is younger and stronger and has better shoulders shoveling this stuff! Actually, that's not what got my attention. What hit me was that because of the way this snowfall came, with lots of wet stuff on the bottom, I couldn't take the shovel all the way to the cement steps. I had to take a bit off of the top, then a bit more, until I finally could get to the steps.

What happens to most of us is that we end up with this huge pile of stuff in front of the door of our hearts and we try to lift it all at once and it gets frustrating. In life, there are small stones which represent the day-to-day things which happen in our lives where other



people wronged us or we do wrong to others. Sometimes they are simply words that we say in the heat of the moment which shouldn't have been said but just come out sometimes. We know we didn't mean it, but they still hurt. Sometimes we are in a bad mood, or we give a dirty look, but in any case, they are small things which are often irritants, but over time they build up.

I think forgiveness is the same way. We can't do it all at once, and sometimes we can't even do it on our own. We must invite Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit to give us the strength to do what we can't do on our own. And as we learn to do that, we don't risk a heart attack or stiff shoulders or a bad back!

Jesus talks about loving our enemies and praying for those who have hurt us, and I want to remind you that this kind of love that Jesus talks about is not a feeling, but a choice. We must intentionally choose to love even when we don't feel like doing it or we continue to take on water and sink in life. We don't always have to communicate the pardon, even though it is good if we can. When we communicate pardon then we bring healing and restoration to the relationship which is what we want ultimately. When we communicate pardon, we show grace from God, who first forgave us.

We also need to recognize that when we offer pardon to someone before it has been asked for, or when it's not warranted yet, it can enable people to keep hurting us and others repeatedly. We also sometimes take away the opportunity for people to be a part of their redemption when we offer forgiveness and pardon so quickly. It sends a message that what they did is not important or no big deal. Part of true forgiveness between two parties is a recognition that a wrong has occurred and that pain has happened, even if we didn't mean to cause it. We have every right to ASK the other person to change and be part of the restoration of our relationship.

How do we let go of this stuff? Let me remind you of the

suggestions I have given you in the past which came from a youth group exercise I did more than 20 years ago. I encourage you to RAP whenever one of the small irritating things happens between siblings or parents or children. RAP is an acronym for three things.

**SLIDE      R - Remember our own shortcomings**

I find that when I'm struggling with forgiveness it's usually because I have forgotten that I'm not perfect. When I feel that someone has offended me it really helps to pause and ask myself, "How many times have I done that my life?" You might even make a list of the five things that you do that irritate other people and carry it around with you in your pocket for a while. If you are unsure of what those things are, then ask your spouse or your friends or your kids or your parents because I can guarantee you, they will give you the list. It's harder to be irritated with somebody else when we are aware of our own shortcomings and how we irritate others.

**SLIDE      A - Assume the best of the other person (*Add to the previous slide please!*)**

We remember that we are not perfect and then we assume the best about other people. She probably had a tough day. He may not even know that thing he did hurt me. If we assume the best rather than assuming the worst, then we attribute to them the best possible motives for what they've done to us and it's much easier to let things go.

**SLIDE      P - Pray for them (*Add to the slide*)**

Jesus is constantly inviting his disciples to pray for those with whom they struggle. He encourages us in the Lord's Prayer to pray for others. We can pray to let go of those little things that we are holding onto, and we pray to bless them, even those who have wronged us, because it changes our hearts. When we do this, we find ourselves letting go of animosity and bitterness. When we pray, "God, please bless \_\_\_\_\_. I'm assuming she didn't really mean to say that, or

even know that hurt. I pray that you would bless him and help him to become the man you want him to be. Make me a blessing to her.”

We might do that with our jaws clenched and we might not even feel it as we begin to pray it, but if we keep rapping, and praying, we find that over time our hearts soften. We usually can get to that place where we wonder why we were even so upset to begin with because it was a little thing. Hopefully we can come to a place where we can just let those small things go.

That is easier to do when it comes to the small, light snow, but when it comes to larger piles of snow with ice or slush at the bottom, it can be harder to do. It’s harder to let go when the other person has not asked for forgiveness, and they have really done something hurtful that has left a mark or caused you trauma. This is why one of the keys to the larger things is to receive repentance from the other person, where they might admit that they were wrong. If we can hear them say, “I’m sorry for what I did. I acknowledge it and I want to make it right and I don’t want to do it again,” it can help so much.

But sometimes, we don’t get that. The other person may not believe they did anything wrong. They may think that they are in the right and you are in the wrong. We might RAP for a while when it comes to something that someone said but it still doesn’t seem to help much, and we can’t brush them off. Maybe you were ignored, or you felt you were not treated as well by someone in your family.

**When we begin to add up a bunch of medium-size piles of snow, we begin to build a wall of ice.** That begins to separate us from each other as we continue to pile them on. We can begin to feel this wall which becomes an emotional barrier or space between us and another person. There are only two ways to break down this wall. The first way is that the other person might recognize what they have done to contribute to the hurt and begin to take down that wall through conversation and apology and honest dialogue which is not accusatory.

To have fruitful conversations without getting too defensive so we can really share with each other what we're feeling, we must offer some grace and mercy first. Hopefully they can come to a place where they can say, "I'm so sorry. I didn't realize it affected you that way. I really do love you and I want to change."

If the other person is never going to grant that to us, then we still must figure out what to do with this wall. We can carry these things around, and leave up a wall around our heart, or we can forgive. Those are the only two options. If we keep carrying these walls up and then just try to attack them all at once, we end up with broken backs, and shoulders, and hearts. I become someone I don't even like anymore, because of the weight I am still carrying around.

While RAPping helps with these, there is one other thing which can help us to let go. When it comes to the bigger things that we often hold against others I would encourage you to add an "S" to the RAP.

**SLIDE      Seek to understand what shaped them**

When we recognize what shaped other people and why they do what they do, it is sometimes much easier to let go of things. Someone once shared with me that they experienced much pain from their father when they were growing up, as did all their siblings. Their dad didn't know how to say, "I love you." He wasn't very kind or compassionate and was a "hard" man. After he had passed away, they discovered that their father, when he was a boy, was treated even more harshly by his parents. When he did something wrong his parents would lock him in the closet with no lights and he sometimes would sit in there alone for hours and even days as a little boy.

Whether we like it or not, we learn how to parent and we develop impulse behaviors in our families of origin. Hopefully we come to the place where the things we didn't like or that were painful we can train ourselves not to do, so we can parent or be in our most intimate relationships in ways that are life-giving. The effort that their father

made was to not lock children in the closet like he was. He never learned how to be tender or affectionate, but he was able to not do the thing that terrified him and kicked the can down the road a bit. I want to be clear that this doesn't dismiss the fact that he wasn't loving and affectionate with his kids as they were growing up. I'm not saying it is okay, but it can shift our hearts to seek to understand the other.

When we seek to understand what shaped people, it becomes easier to let go of things. When your brothers sell you as a slave and then somebody falsely accuses you and you end up not only enslaved but then in prison, you don't just say while you are riding in prison, "Gosh, I just love my brothers! I can't wait to see them again." More than likely, we would be calculating in our minds what we would do to them if we saw them again because they put us in this place. How would you let go of that kind of a rock which becomes overwhelming? This stone up on the altar with us today took several of us just to put it up here. We can't carry these by ourselves.

Most of us have never experienced something like this in our lives, where we have a stone like this, we are trying to pull behind us or which is crushing us. Thank God for that if you don't have one of these. But I'm guessing many of you have one of these things which end up being a stone of this size in your life.

If we could learn how people who have these kinds of stones forgive, then maybe it will help the rest of us also know how to forgive. Over the course of my time as a pastor I have visited with many people who have had these kinds of stones. I've met with adults who were abandoned by their parents as children. I spent time with youth and adults who were beaten by their mothers or fathers, left with welts, bloodied wounds, and bruises on a regular basis, some with permanent physical limitations because of the abuse they incurred.

Some were children like the prodigal son who took and took from their parents. They abused their bodies with drugs and alcohol and

continually went back and took whatever their parents would give them and then would blame their parents and call the names. I've met with parents whose children have stolen from them and left not only empty hearts but empty bank accounts, and then their children refuse to ever talk to them again. The pain is deep, and it feels like one of these stones. Some of the most painful stories are those who were victims of incest from either the parents or other trusted family members and whose intimate relationships have never been able to be fulfilled because of those experiences. This letter should give you an idea of the depth of pain experienced by some and their families.

*I was both abused and abandoned by both parents growing up. It has totally affected me in my adult life. I have carried around this abuse as shame and it's like carrying 1000 backpacks on your soul. It ate me up inside for years and I felt worthless, that it didn't really matter. I couldn't be truly intimate with my husband because I had a huge wall built in my life and I was so full of rage.*

It's not like we can hear a sermon on forgiveness and then say, "Oh good, now I can just go and let it go! I'm just going to pray about it, and it will all be gone." I wish it worked that way, but it doesn't. It happens slowly and by degree as we chip away at the stone in our lives, and we pray that the Holy Spirit will release us from the pain.

There are things we can do to help expedite that process, which is what I have heard from many of you as you have shared your stories with me. Most have found help in finding other people to carry the stone. Often it is a form of therapy and so there are counselors that have helped in recovery as they realize and understand what has happened in their past and find ways to cope and deal with that past. We have a list of counselors on our website available for you to call when you are ready to deal with the rocks that might be surrounding you.

Sometimes it's a small group or a close-knit group of friends that

you feel like you can talk to, and they help to carry this stone until you can let go of it, little by little. There often is more than one person chipping away at the stone as we enlist the help of others.

Many people talk to me about confronting their past, where they were finally able to go to their parent or their child and talk to them directly. I have had people write letters to the people who have hurt them in their childhood that they can no longer meet with because of death or distance or safety. I remember one woman writing about how she was no longer going to let this person who had abused her as a child be in control of her life. She had to be able to say what happened and acknowledge it so she could let it go. It was so hard writing every phrase and word of that letter. She had never even spoken the words out loud before but when she was finished, we burned the letter, and it brought such relief. One woman even sent the letter to her abuser who was in prison and that person wrote back and I read the letter first and then read it to her as he apologized. While it didn't take away the past, it begins the healing process which had been underground.

I use the image of a Band-Aid on a wound. If you put a Band-Aid on a wound, it is because it is necessary to keep you from causing you to lose too much blood. That emergency response is so important to hold things together so healing can begin. But if you never take the Band-Aid off so that the wound can get air, there can be infection and a deeper illness which affects the entire body. Sometimes I have had people put a deceased parent in a chair across the table from them so they could say out loud what he needed to say. When they were finally able to acknowledge out loud what happened there was a tremendous sense of relief and you could feel something leave the room and leave their body.

One person told me how they would pray the Lord's Prayer every single day and when they got that phrase, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," they felt they took a little step. A little piece of the stone was chipped away because they wanted



that to happen in their life and so they kept praying for it so they could be that person. God began to take away their pain through that prayer and they began to experience healing.

One man had an abusive father as he was growing up in the last few years of his life, he actually had to take his father into his home because there was nowhere else for them to go and he was physically in need of help. He struggled with taking care of a father who had abused him when he was a child. The closest his father ever came to telling his son that he loved him was on the day that he died as he was in the hospital. He took his son's hand, and he thanked them for what he had done in caring for him and then he died.

They never had a chance to work things out and so a year after his father died, he took a lawn chair, a bottle of wine and a sandwich to his father's grave. He sat down and talked it all out with him. He told him all of the things which had been hurtful and then he forgave him and he asked his father to forgive him for the things he had done which had been hurtful. Just because the person is gone does not mean you can't have that conversation anymore. If nobody else is listening, you can be sure that God is listening in that conversation.

Finally, one of the ways I've seen forgiveness begin to happen on these large rocks are when we can give those broken places to God, and we can give that experience to God so he can use it to bring about something beautiful in our lives. The Scriptures talk about bringing beauty out of the ashes and this is one of the ways we can find healing from these large stones which overwhelm us. When we can use our brokenness to help others find healing it can change these stones into something beautiful.

I have had more than one parishioner tell me about how their healing began to be complete from being abused as a child when they began to serve others and realized the opportunity, they had to connect with others who were going through similar painful

experiences. Almost every one of our Stephen Ministers is using their gift of compassion and care and presence because of an experience they had which was painful. This is exactly what we find in the story of Joseph, which takes us back to our Scripture passage for today.

When we read the story of Joseph it appears that he had held on to some of the pain of what his brothers had done to him. Somehow, he seemed to have given this pain over to God. He recognized that he was a slave in Egypt but even in that God would use the experience to do something good. Joseph matured and became wise. He changed and developed character because of the suffering he experienced. His soul was deepened and his capacity to care for others became more profound and his relationship with God became central to his life. He began to live a life of integrity and everyone who knew him, knew that he was a man of his word. God had taken the painful things in his life and done something remarkable and profound.

Joseph became the head of Potiphar's house as a slave. He was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and was sent to prison. You would think that would bring bitterness and anger into his life because of sold in the slavery and then sent to prison unjustly, looking to get even with everyone who had wronged him. But instead, he kept asking God to take his pain and do something with it. He recognized that he couldn't change anything in the past and he prayed that God would reshape the future.

Not only was he set free from prison, but he became the right-hand man of the Pharaoh of Egypt. He began to interpret Pharaoh's dreams and when Pharaoh has a dream about a famine that was coming, it was Joseph who interpreted the dream and led Egypt to save enough food to spare the lives of their people and the people of the nations around them, including the Hebrew people. Were it not for the fact that his brothers sold him into slavery, that Potiphar's wife had accused him falsely, then he would never been in a position to save his own siblings. Had he not saved his own siblings, we might not even be

here talking today.

Joseph was able to look back and see God's hand working through those painful moments. He gave it to God and entrusted that God would chip away at the pain of the past and bring something beautiful in the future. This is God's specialty, taking dust and making beautiful things.

This is why the central symbol of the Christian faith is a cross upon which Christ was crucified. The Roman cross was one of the vilest instruments of torture ever developed and yet now we wear it around our necks and as earrings and as tattoos declaring our faith. That is just crazy when you think about it, isn't it? That makes no sense at all, yet God used it for the redemption of the world.

I want to be clear that I don't believe God causes the pain and the suffering, but God can take the junk of our past and bring about something beautiful if we put it in his hands. This is why I love the image of the rock tumbler where you put rocks in a container along with dirt and grit and you let it work and over time you get these beautiful, polished rocks. I have found this to be another powerful way of looking at forgiveness.

**SLIDE      Forgiveness is giving up the hope of a different past.**

I would add something more to that which is the message of our Christian faith when it comes to forgiveness.

**SLIDE      Forgiveness is taking on the hope of a joyful future.**

Forgiveness is about believing that the future can be better than the past. We can't change the past, but if we give it to God then God can use it to bring about redemption. Joseph lived this out as we read at the end of his story.

**BIBLE**

***18 Then his brothers came and threw themselves down before Joseph. "Look, we are your slaves!" they said. 19 But Joseph***

***replied, “Don’t be afraid of me. Am I God, that I can punish you? 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people. 21 No, don’t be afraid. I will continue to take care of you and your children.” So, he reassured them by speaking kindly to them.***

His brothers are convinced that Joseph is going to kill them and so they throw themselves at his feet as an act of mercy. The dream that Joseph had as a child came true as his brothers bowed down before him. The truth is that his brothers might have killed him if the tables were reversed, but Joseph doesn’t go down that path of revenge. Instead, he in essence says, “Look what God did with what you did to me. I am grateful and I have the chance to save you because of the evil you did to me, because God transformed it and redeemed it and brought beauty from the ashes of our relationship.”

When I was a campus pastor intern at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa just out of college, we would do a Vespers service with Holy Communion every Wednesday night for college students. One of the young women who came every single week talked about the power of eating the bread and tasting the cup and feeling like the Holy Spirit was working inside to change her and deliver her from years of abuse. She would often be in tears as she said the Lord’s Prayer after Communion because of the power of redemption and forgiveness that was beginning to be at work in her life.

**SLIDE      Communion**

## **January 7-8 Order**

1. Ely welcomes people and says, **“Today we begin learning together about what forgiveness is, and what it is not.”**
2. Two Songs
3. Jeff welcomes and invites people to greet each other however comfortable and be seated.
  - a. Fill out the Connect card online and we will donate to the food ministry in your name that feeds people in our community.
4. Announcement Video
5. Sermon
6. Communion
7. Prayer
8. Two Songs
9. Prayer and Lord’s Prayer
10. Offering SLIDE and Focus (Counselors and Books)
11. Care Ministers (If any are present)
12. Prayers and Closing Thoughts
  - i. Prayer focus January is for leaders
  - ii. Books in the back
13. Closing Prayer