“Forgiving, Forgetting” / Genesis 45:1-5, 10-15 / 17 August 2014

This story from Genesis makes it look so easy to forgive! Last week we saw young Joseph's brothers debating whether to murder him and then deciding instead to turn a little profit on him and sell him into slavery. Today we find him again in the presence of those brothers, now in a position of great power. He's capable of revenge but offers them pardon. Is forgiveness that simple? No. What we're missing, and the only thing that can bring healing—the only thing at all—is the long decades of silence, the years of grief, and anguish, and anger that Joseph had to endure on the road to this sweet forgiveness. What we have not seen in our whirlwind tour of Joseph's life is all the suffering that brought him from there to here. Forgiveness takes time. Forgiveness is made up, in part, of forgetfulness...which distances our suffering from us and helps us find meaning in it that we couldn't see before. The key to forgiveness is forgetfulness. Forgetting is the hard gift that purifies life and gives us strength to move into the future.

Think how quickly we forget some things. What did you dream about last night? What was your first thought when the alarm clock wakened you the morning before last? Did you ever find your other sock? Forgetfulness comes to sweep away the great bulk of what we say, and do, and think from day to day. Forgetfulness claims all but the most noteworthy things, and even those begin to look different with time.

Recently, out of the blue, my younger daughter Greta said, “Dad, who are our ancestors? I know about grandma and grandpa, but who was before them?” There was little I could say. I'm vaguely aware that our ancestors were the most harmless breed of Germans, the kind who spent the last 300 years on this side of the ocean, painting hexes on barns to ward off witchcraft. But their language, their stories, their beliefs are all lost to me. Of course, I could tell her about my grandparents, whom she never knew. I could describe their voices, which still return to me at times when I'm alone. I could describe their faces, though I could no longer tell you the color of their eyes. I remember that my grandfather smelled of Listerine, and he never spoke except to complain about potato bugs in his garden and Democrats in Congress. (The North was largely Republican in those days, but neither party would be recognizable to him today.) He muttered old adages, too. “A stitch in time, a penny saved, early to bed...” His wife, my grandmother, had the saddest, most faraway eyes, but a sweet vibrato singing voice. She sang rollicking old gospel hymns as she hung clothes on the line. Of them, I can tell my daughter that they lived in one place all their lives, that work was their creed, hard work, constant work, redeeming work. Illness and rest were for the lazy. They did what they thought was right. They were obscure even then and now mostly forgotten.

But what was before them? That was the question. Who were our ancestors? I had to admit that all I had to offer her was a handful of vaguest childhood memories and a few old fashioned names like Ora and Agnes. Mostly all I hold of my great-grandparents is faded visions of a long-ago farmhouse that I could never find today, if indeed it's still standing. I recall a grape arbor, and a gray-haired woman that my parents made me kiss against my will, a woman with a silver braid wrapped around the crown of her head in the Old World style. I have distant memories of climbing an apple tree in my funeral clothes and losing my dress shoe in the crux of that tree. A scratchy Sunday suit and clip-on tie on a hot summer afternoon, a cemetery, “the odor of chrysanthemums.”

Of course, those great-grandparents, too, lived and loved in their day. Their sorrows and joys were as real as mine. They went to war, and dreamed their dreams. They worried, and prayed, and died in childbirth. They're intimate strangers to me. If any single one of those strangers had perished in infancy—as so many did back then—I wouldn't exist. My life is inextricably linked to theirs, as is my daughter's life. But just four generations later, I know next to nothing about them. And so, at Greta's urging, we took our search to the Internet. There, it was easy to find my grandparents' graves, and from there, we simply clicked on the names of their parents, then their parents, then their parents, whole lives, whole stories unknown, reduced to a single click. The further we went, the less familiar the names sounded, until they began to sound downright foreign. Our search took us across the state, each click a little further east, until the Pennsylvania German name “Snyder” finally became the old High German “Schneider.” Then the trail petered out altogether in 1608 in the little cobbled streets of some German village in the valley of the Rhine—our ancestral home, a place that I'd never heard of. All of it forgotten! Not only do we not know what awaits us in life, most of us don't even know what preceded us!

The remarkable thing to me is the fact that each step of the way must have been remembered by the generation just after it. But memory only reaches so far. Two generations later, and certainly three, most things begin to feel like mere history; they're no longer our own personal story, and so they're forgotten. It's the way of things to forget and be forgotten. One by one, our moments, our days, stream into forgetfulness, and in time they are lost. It can feel like a great sadness, but that forgetfulness, too, is a blessing.

Joseph has had decades to ponder the events of that fateful day so long ago when his brothers fell on him, tore away his precious coat, a gift from their father, and sold him into slavery. For years, Joseph used to seethe in his rage, brooding darkly on his revenge. He used to dream of the day when those brothers would fall into his clutches, and he would make them pay for every last humiliation. Revenge was the dream that kept him going, as he languished in an Egyptian prison for a crime he didn't commit. Revenge gave him a purpose in life. His anger was the smooth, heavy stone that he held deep in his heart. It felt like glass, for he'd rubbed it so long and so often. But now, in recent years, tiny cracks had begun to form in the perfect marble surface of that stone. The story used to be very simple: His brothers were jealous rat-finks who sold him into slavery because they hated him. But time and distance had given him a broader perspective on the events leading up to the day his brothers betrayed him. Now, he knows that his brothers hated him because he was their father's favorite. He knew it at the time, and he flaunted it. The bragging, telling them about his dreams of grandeur, strutting around in that ridiculous coat. Yes, he was young and immature back then, but in his heart he knows that he bears some of the blame for their hate. He drove them into a state of pure loathing. The story is no longer simple for Joseph. Now, he's able to find meaning in it, too. He believes that God brought him into Egypt in order to save his father's family—and his brothers themselves—from famine. This is the best and the truest forgiveness. Forgiveness happens after we stop telling ourselves all the same old versions of the story and instead begin to find new meaning in old facts.

This is the beauty of forgetting, for without some small degree of forgetfulness, we might never find the freedom to forgive. Forgetfulness is a gift to all the living. It clears away debris and allows new life to occur. It's in the persistence of those wild vines that we clip back each spring and summer. They would engulf the whole house from the foundation up if we let them. But we don't. We cut them, and dig them up, and maybe even spray them—though we regret using chemicals. And yet, the vines strive for life. They forget our constant attacks, and they just keep coming; they continue reaching for the sun. Forgetfulness is in the skies, in the trees, in the water. The gift of forgetting is how we move forward into the future with hope and joy. If we forget too much, of course, we lose ourselves. But if done well, over time, forgetfulness is a river that drains the fertile plains of our souls. It is healing, and renewal, and new life.

When I was a freshman in college, one day I found a dead snake in the student parking lot. It wasn't an especially large or scary snake, but I was mischievous back in those days, still finding my moral footing as I very slowly journeyed toward the ministry. I liked to shock people. And so I slipped the little serpent into my book bag and went to visit a friend in his dorm room. My friend was preoccupied with his homework, so I furtively coiled up the snake on his roommate's desk. Its eyes were open; it looked ready to strike. My friend never noticed it, but when his roomie got home, he squealed and threw a hairbrush at the snake. (After all, this was the late 80s, and most men still had a hairbrush within reach.) People came running, and word got out that I had put a dead snake on So-and-So's desk. Some thought it was hilarious, and others rightly thought I was a jerk. Now, truly, I did not to single out my victim. I was just a prankster who had a dead snake to deposit in someone's personal space, and circumstances led me to this guy's desk. But this particular fellow was awkward and overweight, and he had clearly been the butt of too many jokes in his lifetime. To him my prank just felt like bullying, a feeling he knew all too well. I figured this out, and apologized sincerely and profusely. The snake became a legend. To this day, whenever I see someone who knew me in college, they still mention it. The one person who does not mention it is the guy who found it on his desk. He doesn't remember it. He denies that the event ever occurred.

There are many kinds of forgetting. There's the self-protective forgetting that comes from trauma, like the kind I inflicted on my poor college acquaintance. He's “blocked” the whole snake event because he felt so bullied by it. But then there are the every day forgettings, too, the forgetting of things that matter little, or that seemed to matter little at the time: passwords, appointments, telephone numbers, pans left on the stove. It's always fun to tell pastors that you've been thinking about something they said in their sermon last week, then watch their eyes closely as they scramble through the old cerebral archives, trying to remember what they preached about last week. There's the normal forgetting of day-to-day things, which is healthy, for it keeps us from becoming overloaded. But also there's the forgetting of those things that would be burdensome to remember: The debt of gratitude that would weigh too heavily unless we swept it aside; the guilt that would crush us; the sorrow that would incapacitate us. The human mind strives for clarity, and forgetfulness is one of its healthy tactics. It can hurt to forget, but forgetfulness, too, is the sweet daily gift that keeps life moving forward.

But what does all this have to do with forgiveness? Look what Joseph does when confronted with the brothers who sold him into slavery. He says, essentially, “I hate what you did to me, and for many years I hated you. And yet, I am the powerful person I am today in part because of what you did, and I love the person I am.” Time alone gives us the wisdom to re-see our own stories in their rich complexity. The forgetfulness of time allowed Joseph to see past his pain to the bigger picture of his life and how it fits into the greater scheme of the world. Because he suffered, now he's able to rescue his own family and the father he loves from famine. After time had dulled his initial pain and anger, Joseph was free to assign new meaning to old events in his life.

It was no longer a tragic story of how his hateful brothers tried to kill him and ended up separating him from the father he loved. It was now a story of redemption, rescue, renewed relationships. Tragedies can become comedies, but it takes time, even a very long time. It takes the gentle process of forgetfulness, which makes the pain and anger more distant, which gives us at last the freedom to see the bigger picture and assign new meanings to old facts.

And so, if you are struggling to forgive someone, be patient. Very often, people say, “I forgive you" too prematurely. It can take decades. Instead of saying, "I forgive you" to someone you can't yet forgive, try saying, "I've decided to begin the process of forgiving you." Hallmark does not sell greeting cards to that effect, but it's usually a truer sentiment. And once you've made the determination to forgive, then preheat the oven two, maybe three decades. Allow the hand of time to visit you with the tender gift of forgetfulness—making your pain and anger more and more distant, giving you ever broader perspective on your life. And when the moment is right, allow new meanings to emerge from the same old story in your life.

I wonder if it isn't time to assign some new meanings to the old stories that keep us stuck and broken, bitter and angry? I am quite certain that in the life of the world, we could benefit from the good gift of forgetfulness that alone can push aside our old hurts, our national hurts, our racial hurts, the long-remembered wounds that we nurture fresh and new each day. In Israel, in Iraq, let the sweet process of forgetting come and teach us to live together at last in a state of acceptance and true forgiveness. Let time soothe the old hurts and show us the bigger pictures of our own history.

And what about you? If the sweet hand of forgetfulness has dulled your anger and pain, your shame, or guilt, or unhappiness, then perhaps it's time for you too to look for new meanings in your old stories. Isn't it time for you to say, with Joseph, "I hate what happened to me, but it made me who I am and I love who I am and so I can forgive"? Are you ready at last to move on, to forgive? Amen.