

Forgive and forget? (Genesis 45:1-15)

Forgiveness is hard, and it's hard for Joseph's brothers to trust it.

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“Forgiveness is hard.” I often utter this truism to others, always in the hope that someone somewhere will disagree and offer some profound advice for me, as I seem to struggle particularly with this most important of virtues. No luck so far. All I usually get back are nodding heads and knowing sighs. Yes, true forgiveness is hard—for both the forgiver and the forgiven.

The Bible often draws mere outlines of stories, leaving us to fill in some of the details by studying the historical and textual context. Other passages are told in such astonishing detail that we seem to have everything we need right there in the text. Perhaps no other account in Genesis is told in more detail than the story of Joseph and his brothers, particularly the last part of their reunion and Joseph's forgiveness.

Still, for a forgiveness hunter like me, this doesn't mean that more details wouldn't be helpful. I'm apparently joined by Nobel prize winner Thomas Mann, whose magnum opus *Joseph and His Brothers* encompasses 2,000 pages in four densely written volumes!

I have unanswered questions, particularly about how Joseph ends up finding and extending forgiveness. Because it is forgiveness that he has found when, right after

revealing his identity, he exclaims to his older brothers, “So it was not you who sent me here, but God.”

Before reaching this point, Joseph sends his brothers on an emotional rollercoaster. As the brothers are propelled up and down, back and forth, they start to realize that this is all related to their terrible crime of decades ago (“So now here comes reckoning for his blood”), a realization that must deepen ever more when Benjamin, the youngest and only innocent brother, is framed for and accused of theft, restaging the scene of betrayal of a young brother.

From the viewpoint of the person who needs to be forgiven, forgiveness only makes sense and can only be valued when they fully comprehend the depth of their own destructive behavior. This is achieved by this escalation of ever-threatening behaviors by Joseph toward his older, guilty brothers and eventually against the innocent and cherished younger brother.

This long and messy story is not to be understood as a blueprint for how to cruelly impress on others the weight of their sins but instead for how we need to comprehend the extent of our sins in our relationship with God. Only when we understand our own sinfulness can we ask for forgiveness and appreciate the power of such forgiveness.

There is another aspect of forgiveness in this story: the uniqueness of God’s forgiveness. In Ngbaka, a language spoken by approximately 1 million people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there are two terms that can be used for “forgive.” One, εε, means “forgive and forget” and the other, mbɔkɔ, means “to excuse something.” εε was first tried out in the translation of the Bible into Ngbaka but was eventually aborted because the native translation team felt that people might well forgive but, unlike God, can’t forget.

When Joseph offers his brothers forgiveness right after revealing his identity, his brothers are not able to trust the “εε” nature of Joseph’s forgiveness. They are convinced that he is still carrying a grudge; in fact, years later after their father Jacob dies, they concoct a story to trick Joseph into forgiving them again (Gen. 50:15ff.).

In response, Joseph weeps. And then forgives again.

In my ongoing quest to understand forgiveness, I’m moved and inspired by Joseph’s remarkable mbɔkɔ and broken by God’s willingness to extend εε to forgetful

humanity—and to me.