

The Bigger Picture
September 15, 2002
Genesis 50:15-21

Dear Friends in Christ,

It was a fate worse than their most terrifying nightmare. For years 10 of Jacob's sons had lived with a terrible secret. They had sold their own brother Joseph into slavery and had let their father, Jacob, think he had been killed by wild animals. It had all seemed so appropriate at the time. The arrogant little dreamer and daddy's boy hadn't been so cocky in the end. He had cried and pleaded for his life when they let him down into an old well. Most of them had hated him so much they were ready to let him die. Only Reuben and Judah had second thoughts. Judah finally had convinced them to sell the boy into slavery for 20 pieces of silver instead of letting him die. Yes, they thought, the spoiled brat has finally gotten his comeuppance.

What they hadn't counted on was the depth, the tearing anguish, of their father's sorrow. It was one thing to hurt the dreamer. It was quite another thing to see their father lost in sorrow, grieving away his life. Their hearts were torn, but it was too late. Even Reuben and Judah were caught in the lie. No one dared breathe a word of what had really happened. Perhaps time would heal his sorrow. But, of course, time didn't heal. The hurt remained in Jacob's eyes, and nightmares haunted their sleep.

As bad as this was, the brothers never could have imagined what would happen when they had to go down to Egypt to buy food for their starving families. Joseph wasn't only alive, but had the authority of Pharaoh himself. At first he hadn't revealed himself to them. He had tested their integrity. He had jailed Simeon and forced them to bring his younger brother Benjamin to Egypt. But when he saw Benjamin, it was too much. He was so overcome with emotion that he fled the room and found a place to cry alone. Later, when he revealed himself to his brothers, he first sent the servants out of the room and then began to weep. He cried so loudly that the whole palace could hear. Through his tears he proclaimed, "I am your brother Joseph!" Stunned, "his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence".

The years of silent collusion, the years of deceiving their father, were all terribly undone. Now their father would know their wickedness and Joseph would exact revenge. But Joseph made it clear that he didn't want revenge. "God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance," he declared. But the brothers didn't hear him. Their minds were

swimming. Guilt and panic were overwhelming them. Joseph hugged Benjamin and kissed each of them, but they didn't trust him. Guardedly, they began to talk with him. He was so animated and seemed genuinely happy to see them. He was excited about seeing their father, Jacob. He wanted them to bring their families to Egypt, where he could provide for them. He acted as though their betrayal were really a blessing.

Surely he was deceiving them! Surely he would get his revenge when the right moment came. They couldn't trust him. The years that followed were filled with blessings. Their father, Jacob, seemed to be reborn when he was reunited with Joseph. Pharaoh gave them land in the rich delta area of the Nile. Their families and livestock prospered. Yet the brothers couldn't really enjoy the prosperity. They had no real peace or joy because they kept wondering when Joseph would exact his revenge. It was incomprehensible to them that their betrayal could truly be forgiven.

Over the years the brothers began to develop a theory. "Joseph is being nice to us for the sake of our father. When he is gone our lives will be in danger." So it was that they began to formulate a plan. After Jacob died, they would approach Joseph, saying their father had wanted their lives to be spared. The dreaded day finally came. In his 147th year, Jacob died. At his request, Joseph and the brothers took his body back to Canaan to be buried in the family plot.

After returning to Egypt, the brothers put their plan into motion. They asked for an audience with Joseph and sent this message to him, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of God your father." The Bible tells us that Joseph wept when he got their message. When the brothers came before Joseph, they threw themselves down saying, "We are your slaves." How heavy Joseph's heart was! How could he assure his brothers that they truly were forgiven? How could he help them be free of their guilt? How could he remove the foreboding cloud of fear from their lives?

He answered, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children". Joseph invited his brothers to see the bigger picture. God was at work here keeping the covenant promises he had made to Abraham and Isaac. He was building a nation. He was preparing a people for the Promised Land. He was preparing a blessing for the peoples of the world. Like his great-grandfather Abraham, Joseph believed these

promises and, in faith, he was content to wait for God to fulfill them. Because of the joy set before him in these promises, he was willing to suffer harm from the brothers without revenge. Because of the joy set before him, he was willing to forgive and let the promises unfold. Joseph lived his life fully, joyfully, free from the poison of revenge, trusting God's promises. His brothers lived little lives, lives filled with jealousy, revenge, guilt, and dread. They constantly worried about how they might pry loose a little happiness for themselves. Joseph invited them to share his joy, to accept forgiveness, to lift their eyes from themselves to God.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob kept his promises. He remained faithful to the bigger picture. In the fullness of time, he sent his Son, born of Mary, a descendant of Abraham. Like Joseph, Jesus suffered at the hands of his own people. They sold him for 30 pieces of silver. But, unlike Joseph, his life wasn't spared. They hung him on a cross to die. For the sake of God's bigger picture, for the sake of a people saved for an eternal promised land, for the sake of the joy set before him, Jesus committed his life into the hands of His heavenly Father. Three days later the Father was faithful. He raised Jesus from the grave! He raised Jesus to offer forgiveness, not revenge, to those whose sins nailed him to the cross. Jesus weeps for us, for the world, when he sees us missing the joy and beauty that surround us because we are consumed with prying a little happiness from life through deception. How he must weep for us when he sees us living unforgiven lives. He invites us to join Joseph in seeing the bigger picture, in trusting God's promise — the promise that there is forgiveness in the blood of Jesus. Those who believe in him are heirs of the eternal promised land. Trusting this promise there is freedom — freedom from guilt, freedom from fear, freedom to recrimination, freedom to see and enjoy the beauty that surrounds us. And there is the freedom we find in forgiving others as we, ourselves, have been forgiven. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.