

Study Guide

Series: Forgiveness
“Forgiving Families”

Monday - Genesis 33:1-11. This story draws on deep currents of history and emotion. Jacob tricked Esau out of his birthright and his father’s blessing, then fled his father’s home to escape Esau’s wrath. Jacob’s descendants, the Israelites, often warred with Esau’s offspring, the nation of Edom. Yet they preserved this story, in which Esau forgives his kid brother. Jacob felt a lot of fear as he approached the country where Esau lived (Genesis 32:7), and with good reason. Yet with many precautions, he moved forward, humbly seeking a renewal of the family ties. When has your own fear, or someone else’s fear of you, been a barrier to healing? Are there any fears you need to start dealing with today? Jacob showed humility and repentance as he came to the brother he had wronged. Unlike Jacob, people sometimes see themselves as entitled to forgiveness “just because I’m family.” What do you believe—does anyone have a right to demand forgiveness? What does it take to bring healing where there has been hurt?

Tuesday - Genesis 45:1-15. Joseph was his dad’s favorite. In his coat of many colors, he often acted superior to his brothers. Sibling rivalry ran amok, and they sold him to slavers going to Egypt. There, in time, he became second in command to the Pharaoh. During a famine, the brothers who sold him came to buy food from their unrecognized sibling—and he was gracious to them. In Genesis 42-44, before he forgave and welcomed his brothers, Joseph gave them some stern tests. In Joseph’s place (terribly betrayed by these men, you now have the power to grant them life or death), what would it take for you set aside a cruel betrayal like theirs? What inner struggles do you think Joseph had before he could forgive? The brothers were terrified at first. This powerful Egyptian official was the brother they had literally sold out! But at the end of the passage, Genesis says “his brothers talked with him.” What role does open, honest communication play in moving past fear to forgiveness and reconciliation? Is there someone you need to talk with?

Wednesday - Genesis 50:12-21. When their father Jacob died, Joseph’s brothers were afraid. We saw yesterday that it took Joseph time to work through his feelings before he forgave his brothers. In the brothers, we see that it can take time to receive and trust forgiveness for deep hurts, too. Their frightened, transparent effort to put words in their dead father’s mouth moved Joseph to tears. Imagine yourself in Joseph’s brothers’ shoes. The brash kid you sold to slave traders is now the second most powerful man in the foreign land where you live. Rulers there hold absolute power. Your brother said he forgave you, but the family patriarch, the one person whose moral authority might have held Joseph back, just died. Would you be at all afraid of what might happen? Why or why not? As in yesterday’s reading from Genesis 45, we read that Joseph wept. What role does expressing sorrow play in the process of forgiving, or receiving forgiveness from a person you’ve hurt? How can repressing sorrow or regret block reconciliation?

Thursday - Luke 2:41-52. The gospels only tell us this one story from the thirty years between Jesus’ birth and the start of his public ministry. Interestingly, it’s a story that shows Jesus’ parents as worried and upset with him. The word “forgiveness” is not in the story, but it seems plain that Jesus’ parents had to work through the worry and pain Jesus caused them at that time.

Jesus seemed surprised when his mother said they'd searched anxiously for him. Did you ever do anything that scared or upset your parents, but seemed logical and safe to you? Can you better appreciate some of your parents' fears now? What helps or hinders you in trying to forgive reactions that still feel excessive to you? "Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover." That took effort and sacrifice. These good people were raising their son "right." Might Mary, like many parents, have hoped that parenting "right" would avoid any strains with her son? If you have children, are there things you are having to forgive them for?

Friday - Mark 3:21-35, John 19:25-27. We may picture Jesus' family life with no conflicts or need for forgiveness. Not the gospels. Mark wrote that Jesus' mother and brothers said at one point, "He is out of his mind." They went to take charge of him, but Jesus rebuffed them. Yet amid the awful pain of crucifixion he cared enough to think of his mother's needs. He showed his total love and care for her. What kinds of pain do you carry from your parents? From siblings? From your children (if any)? In what ways have you caused pain to others in your family? What steps can you take to begin (or advance) the hard process of forgiveness and reconciliation in those areas of pain? How can you grow spiritually and emotionally so that you can live beyond pain even if other family members are not yet able to seek healing?