

(with thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor)

*So Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid...So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.*

During the summer Sundays of August our sermon reflections explored the extraordinary story of Jacob and his family, especially his sons, the youngest of whom—Joseph, was Jacob's favorite. As Jacob's miracle child born to Jacob as a very old man, Joseph was—as we might imagine, resented by Joseph's older brothers. One day while tending Jacob's herds and flocks, the older brothers hatched a plan in which they would rid themselves of their irritating brother. They seized him, tore off his multi-colored robe and bloodied it to convince their father that Joseph had been devoured by a wild lion. And they sold their brother Joseph into slavery to a passing caravan on its way down to Egypt, believing that Joseph would disappear from their lives forever.

Instead of disappearing into the massive system of slavery dying an untimely death in Egypt, Joseph—the dreamer blessed by God—seizes opportunities and capitalizes on his God-given talents and gifts. From the last and lowest rung of the social and economic ladder in Egypt, Joseph ascends to the highest position of prestige in the land. Second only to Pharaoh himself, Joseph becomes an essential and esteemed person--managing the household of Pharaoh, overseeing the fortunes of the whole kingdom as Secretary of the Treasury, Agriculture and State—all rolled into one. It is in this position as visionary and wise steward that Joseph, astutely setting aside surplus in time of abundance, feeds the Kingdom and foreigners in their time of need—indeed his very brothers who come to Egypt and who years before, sold him into slavery. Joseph, transformed by his otherwise painful experience and the infusion of the grace of God, instead of spite and hate toward his brothers, forgives them saying to them: *God intended all this for good; Have no fear, I myself will provide for you and your little ones.* This is our theme today, our hope, expectation and intention at CHT.

Joseph's story is an astounding story of reversal, which is the characteristic of the stories, parables, and teachings of holy scripture—God transforming what is at first sight old and tired, bereft and lost, fearful and afraid through resurrection and new birth—a person, family, cause, or church—a bright-shining, Spirit-filled example of the grace, love and power of God,

Last week as parishioners and guests came to this church, we were greeted by a large white sign of bright red letters: *Welcoming Sunday and Ministry Fair.* Another sign of welcome greets us every Sunday and weekday reading: *Welcome to this house of prayer not as a stranger but as a guest of God.* We believe in that sign, in the same way we believe God speaks to us through Joseph's words of welcome and grace: *I myself will provide for you and your little ones.*

Today is the first day of church school, what we call formation for youth, middle schoolers and high schoolers as well as adults. All around us a new thing is happening and unfolding: What we thought we were as a church is being changed, transformed, shaped in new ways by the grace and love of God. By God's grace Diane Greenhill and a wonderfully spirited group of teachers are transforming our church school program even and especially in the absence of a permanent church school staff person. These volunteers have assumed responsibility and are creating a renewed church school program; in the same way middle and high schoolers for the first time with a terrific group of volunteer mentors have an every Sunday morning program of exploration, seeking a renewed and deeper sense of themselves—how and where they fit into the dreams of God.

We welcome a host of friends and anticipate many new ones who enter this church on a quest: some seeking a spiritual home—a house of worship filled with prayer, others are looking for a place where their children will learn the stories of our Christian faith; others seeking a judgment-free environment in which to be embraced as family; others will look to deepen their faith and rekindle the hopes and promises remembered from childhood; others looking to know and claim Kingdom of God trusting in the love of Jesus. There are a variety of reasons for coming to this church, all of them honored in this community of faith. We are delighted you are here. We pray that you will find all that you are looking for and more besides, especially that God will find you, transforming your life in ways you cannot now imagine.

A church is many things to many people: this morning I hold up an image crafted by our Faith in Action team (our outreach committee) exploring our church and ministry as a **Shelter for Body and Soul**, which is both a place and a way of transformation in which our old selves, the selves that come through the door of this church encumbered; angry, feeling hurt, discouraged of a Sunday morning or for a weekday meeting or class might be transformed by the loving grace of God; that those burdens and beliefs to which we cling might be changed enabling us to be fully alive in the glory of God. We hope this to be a company of expectant people, those yearning for and seeking the Kingdom of God. We are a people on the way to the Promised Land. We are those on a journey and so we wholeheartedly welcome those who will come with us along the Way. As travelers do, here we offer hospitality and a warm welcome one and all. We do this because God has first offered us hope and hospitality. This is our way of sharing a fair measure of what we have been given by God like Joseph; the encouragement to journey toward the discovery of our deepest selves, of embracing others in this community and with all sisters and brothers in Christ, and especially to deepen our reliance and trust in Jesus Christ.

As we renew and rekindle our gospel hope this morning, Matthew reminds us of one of the most important characteristics of a church seeking to shelter body and soul. To the Apostle Peter who comes to Jesus asking: Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times? To which Jesus responds, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Jesus explains that a characteristic of church is that it is a forgiven community, *a forgiven community*. In spite of all those things we have done or left undone, we have been forgiven by God. The forgiveness of God is a gift given to one and all not because of anything we have deserved but is offered solely by the grace of God. Joseph’s ability to forgive his brothers—Jesus’ response to Peter is a stunning declaration that forgiveness is the essential character of life as a Christian. In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have been redeemed. A gift has been given us whose value is beyond price. You may wonder, what is it worth? Seven, seventy-seven, or seventy times seven, or even 10,000 talents of silver?

I imagine all of us are familiar with the word, “umpteen”, as in, “I have told you umpteen times to take out the trash”. “Umpteen” is a real gospel word, a word of grace. It conveys the love of a parent who does not bother to keep an *exact* count of one’s sins. It speaks of the persevering love that surrounds us, even though certain sins and patterns of fault are habitual in our lives. Umpteen has a nice ring, much nicer than, say, seven, or seventeen or seventy-seven. “Lord, when my brother wrongs me, how often must I forgive him? Seven times? “No, Jesus replies, not seven times; I say, *umpteen* times. It is in the act of forgiving others that we experience the power of the forgiveness of God.

What we learn from Matthew is that forgiveness is not a matter of *if*, but a matter of *because*. God forgives because it is God’s nature to do so, because God created, redeemed and daily loves us. We forgive because God forgives.

Amen