

I listened the other day to a radio interview on cbc from the program, Tapestry (with Mary Hynes). The interviewee was with Rabbi Lord Jonathon Sacks who won the 2016 Templeton Prize for his book, "Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence." This award is given annually to someone who has made a profound spiritual contribution to the world. A few years ago he was the chief rabbi for the United Kingdom (1991-2013). Sacks earned the Templeton prize for two matters-for affirming the spiritual dimension of life and for working to end religious violence.

The atheist would say that the way to get rid of religious fanaticism which can lead to violence is to get rid of religion. Jonathon Sacks is quick to say that the cause of violence is not religion at all, **the cause of violence is the human heart**. I think that the story of Joseph shows us some of this reality. There is a point where Joseph seems to be seeking revenge. Another thing that was raised in the Sacks interview is the naïve accusation that 'belief' is some kind of crutch. Sacks counters, "faith is not a tranquilizer designed to lower your blood pressure, it is a summons to collective responsibility for building the human future." I think that the Joseph story also gives us an illustration of this.

Joseph has been lauded as a model of forgiveness, but we only see that at the end of the story. You may remember the story. If you don't here's a concise version, Joseph was the favoured younger brother, loved and spoiled by his father, hated by his siblings. But who wouldn't hate a sibling that came to the dinner table and said, "Oh, I had this really cool dream last night. We were all binding sheaves of wheat in the field, and your sheaves all gathered round and bowed down to mine. I guess one day you will all be bowing down to me, eh."

If that wasn't bad enough, the next night he reported that in his dream eleven stars and the sun and the moon were all bowing down to him. Even his father, the supposed sun, was upset about that sort of bragging. The brother's jealousy and anger simmered until one day they were out in the fields, keeping watch over the flock, when Joseph came to check on them. They threw him down a dry well and would have left him for dead but Judah suggested they sell him to some slave traders headed to Egypt which was probably just as much a death sentence so they did.

But Joseph and his propensity for dreams and their interpretation managed to get himself appointed Minister of Agriculture in Pharaoh's court and then as a famine approached Prime Minister. Now there are lots of issues in this complicated story, like the Bible and God condoning slavery and the oppression of the people by the rulers. Joseph during the good years, taxed the farmers and stored up their grain and then during the famine years sold it back to them taking their money, their livestock, and then their land and then their freedom driving into slavery the Egyptian people who had once enslaved him.

One has to ignore a lot of the story to pretend that Joseph was a wise and good ruler. And when those brothers of his came down to Egypt to buy grain, for the famine had spread even to Canaan, he was hardly a model of forgiveness. We actually see that on his heart was a sense of revenge. The brothers came to buy grain. They were not asking for a hand-out, but Joseph recognized them and "spoke to them harshly, like strangers."

He falsely accused them of being spies and insisted that they prove their honesty by producing the younger brother that they had inadvertently mentioned. He sent them back to get the younger brother with the bags of grain they had bought but placed their money back into the tops of the bags so that they thought they were being framed for robbery. No wonder they didn't come back until they were really desperate for more grain. This time Joseph framed Benjamin for robbery by placing his own silver cup in Benjamin's bag and then sending his soldiers out to retrieve it.

He threatened to keep Benjamin as a slave which would have devastated his father but Judah intervened offering his own life into slavery instead. Joseph seemed to be following a modern, don't get mad get even strategy, but by the section we read today even he had had enough. The very flawed human Joseph gives way to his better qualities.

"He could no longer control himself." The game was up. It was time for the great reveal. "I'm Joseph. Is my father still alive?" The brothers were stunned. I don't imagine they caught too much of Joseph's rather questionable theology that seemed to excuse the evil actions of their youth. "Don't worry, the human trafficking you engaged in was all part of God's plan. Just go and get dear old dad, bring him here and I'll set you all up with the best land in Egypt."

Don't ask what might have happened to the Egyptians who were already living on the best land in Egypt. As I said, it is a complicated story. The thing that occurred to me, reading this story this time through was that no one ever said, "Sorry." We read, after Joseph's rambling discourse, that he fell on Benjamin's neck and wept and he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them: after that they talked.

It wasn't until five chapters and seventeen years later, (in the last chapter of Genesis) when old Jacob had died that the brothers began to get a bit worried. "What if Joseph was only being nice to us for Dad's sake? What if he still bears a grudge and decides to pay us back?" They decided to take the initiative. "Say, bro, before Dad died, he said to tell you that he really hopes that you have forgiven your brothers for that little slave trading incident. You have, haven't you? Please forgive us. We'll be your slaves."

Joseph responded, “Don’t worry, and you needn’t bow down to me. I’m not God although at times I acted as if I was.” In the end the story is not just about how God saved the people of Israel but about how God saved Joseph and his brothers.

Awhile ago at a funeral I attended, the bereaved brother made a rather impassioned plea to everyone there to keep talking to your siblings. He praised his elder brother as the best brother anyone could ask for and said he couldn’t imagine how people could go for years without talking to some members of their family. He made reference to his father-in-law who had died a few months earlier and commented on how sad it was to watch as the brother of his father-in-law showed up at the bedside just hours before his brother died to be reconciled. The reconciliation was some comfort, but everyone felt the loss of so many wasted years.

Common wisdom would say that you can’t have reconciliation without forgiveness and you can’t have forgiveness without repentance but I wonder about that. Forgiveness is a tricky business. Do you have to hear someone say, “I’m sorry,” before you can forgive them?

Can you forgive someone if they don’t admit to or even recognize the harm that they have done? Can forgiveness be one-sided or does it take two? Can you have reconciliation without forgiveness? Christian wisdom, God’s wisdom is not the world’s wisdom.

While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. God didn’t wait for us to confess our sins and seek forgiveness. Salvation is a gift in Christ. Maybe common wisdom has it backwards. Maybe reconciliation leads to forgiveness and forgiveness leads to repentance.

“I’m sorry, I forgive you, let’s be friends again,” may work on the playground but for really big transgressions, human trafficking, fraud, war, apartheid it is not that simple.

Desmond Tutu was archbishop of South Africa when apartheid was being dismantled. As a black leader seeking justice for his people, he had felt that brunt of the oppression that had sent Nelson Mandela to prison. When he and others sought to begin to heal South Africa’s sins with a process of truth telling and reconciliation, I don’t think he thought that everyone would just forgive each other but he realized that the truth needed to be told and reconciliation needed to begin.

Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, they wept and they talked. Perhaps he said to them, “I haven’t forgiven you yet, but we can talk. Reconciliation may be the beginning of forgiveness and repentance even if it takes seventeen years to articulate it. Joseph was human, like us, flawed, yet God worked through him for good.

This is a picture of the place, the site of the United Church of Canada apology to indigenous peoples of Canada in 1986 at the General Council meeting at Laurentian University in the city of Sudbury. At the time the leaders of the indigenous people said, “we hear and appreciate your apology.” “We now wish to see it lived out as we now walk forward together.” They did not say they accepted it, they wanted to see what happens from that point on. The picture I am showing was from 2016, 30 years after the apology was made there was a marking of the occasion. Since then we have the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that has been set up by our federal government.

Forgiveness is at the root of our Christian faith but I don’t know that many of us have it all figured out. It is hard work. Knowing we should forgive doesn’t make it easier. It’s complicated but surely it begins when we talk. Even if we are not ready to forgive, we can still be in relationship. Perhaps reconciliation is a first step and perhaps as mature Christians it is up to us to offer the forgiveness we have been shown in Christ believing that repentance, a change of heart, will come and God’s love will be known both in us and in others. Thanks be to God. Amen.