

## FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | SEPTEMBER 13, 2020

GENESIS 50:15-21 | PSALM 103:1-13 | ROMANS 14:1-12 | MATTHEW 18:21-35

Amanda Sacks had a very difficult job. Sacks worked on the construction of the 9/11 memorial in New York City. The memorial, built under incredible time constraints and over the top of a mess of city infrastructure, is rightly considered an engineering marvel. But Sacks wasn't an engineer or an architect or a construction worker. She was a researcher.

As you probably know, the memorial is built around two waterfalls where the towers once stood. And around the edge of the waterfalls are the names of 2,983 victims. On most memorials, the names of individuals are listed alphabetically or chronologically. But the 9/11 memorial architects wanted them organized by what they called "meaningful adjacency."<sup>1</sup> People would be grouped with individuals they had personal connections to. Sacks's job was to figure out how to arrange all 2,983 names.<sup>2</sup>

She went to firehouses, spoke to families, looked at flight records. The process took Sacks three years. And she got close. Except for one set. A couple who was on Flight 11 who knew someone on Flight 175. Sacks tried hundreds of possibilities to get them next to each other. But no matter how many arrangements she tried, she couldn't make it fit.

The power of meaningful adjacency is that it captures the networks of relationships between people. It was almost as if you could look at the sea of names and have a complete, discrete, closed picture of what had been lost to history. But what Sacks discovered is that you really can't. Once something is broken, you can never put it back together in quite the same way.

Our inability to put things back together is at the heart of today's reading from Genesis, the very end of the Joseph saga which comes at the very end of the book of Genesis. Genesis begins with a story of how life came to be, and it ends with a story of how people learn to get through it. The way oversimplified version of this story, which runs for fifteen chapters, is that Joseph's brothers hated him because their father Jacob loved Joseph so much. Joseph was born in Jacob's old age, and Joseph had these sort of magical dreams that seemed to predict the future. So Joseph's brothers sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt and told their father that Joseph had been killed. But Joseph's dreams caught the eye of Pharaoh. And when Joseph predicted a famine, the Egyptians were able to stockpile grain. That grain ends up saving not just the Egyptians but also people like his brothers who came to Egypt in search of food. Eventually, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and provides for them. That's about where today's reading starts.

Today's reading is often lifted up as an example of forgiveness being good and Jesus even says its good in today's gospel reading and so you should do more of it. Forgiveness makes all the world's problems go away, we tell ourselves. You could even imagine a happy ending to this story. Joseph's brothers recognize the harm they've done. Joseph forgives them completely. And they go back home to live with their father. But it doesn't end that way at all. The brothers still haven't totally changed their conniving ways. (Notice how they use Joseph's relationship with his father to try to leverage forgiveness from him.) Their father, who is being invoked, is now dead. And, as Joseph suggests, it's a relationship that is still marked by fear. Fear of retaliation. Fear of punishment. Fear of deception. Even though the worst of their animosity is behind them, Joseph and his brothers aren't able to live free of their pasts. They're still constrained by history.

When I was reading the Exodus story with Rabbi Beni recently, he pointed out something I'd never noticed before. The word for "Egypt" in Hebrew is *Mitzrayim*, which comes from the word for "narrow." In the

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Tischler, "At 9/11 Memorial, Name Placements Reflect Bonds Between Victims, Thanks To Algorithm," Fast Company, May 5, 2011, <https://www.fastcompany.com/1663780/at-911-memorial-name-placements-reflect-bonds-between-victims-thanks-to-algorithm>.

<sup>2</sup> Interview from "Revisionist History Season 5 Episode 10," Revisionist History, accessed September 9, 2020, <http://revisionisthistory.com/episodes/51-a-memorial-for-the-living>.

Jewish tradition, Egypt isn't just a particular place. Egypt is symbolic of being held in a place where you can't move, where you're confined, where you're stuck. Like Sacks trying to make the names fit in some logical way, you try and try and try, but you realize that you can't quite make things work perfectly. Your options are constrained. You can't make things fit. You can't bring things back together.

The truth is, sometimes we can't be reconciled to other people. Like the brothers in this story, they may not take full responsibility for what they've done. They may not be straightforward and honest with us. They might think that they are the ones who have been wronged. You can't be reconciled to someone who doesn't want to be reconciled to you. If this is a story about becoming reconciled to one another, it's a pretty weak reconciliation.

But what Joseph finds in this story is a sense of reconciliation with his own history. And that's why Joseph's declaration is so profound. "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today." Joseph's brothers may have wanted to kill Joseph, but they have done the exact opposite. Not only has Joseph survived, his survival is the only reason they haven't starved. Their evil actions haven't been undone or reversed, but they have been transformed in a very radical way.

This isn't to say that this bad thing that happened is actually good if you look on the bright side and lower your expectations. Bad things are still bad. Evil is still evil. Suffering is still suffering. It simply means that God and God's spirit working in us can create new life out of death. In Joseph's case, it doesn't mean saying that being forced into Egypt was actually good. It means realizing that even when he was abandoned by his brothers, he hadn't been abandoned by God. That trust in God's constancy is what allows him to forgive his brothers.

Forgiveness doesn't promise us a return to the way things were. But forgiveness does mean that just because we live with the effects of the past, we don't have to live in the narrowness they create. We often think that we can control the future but not the past. But forgiveness actually tells us something else. That even if we can't change the events of the past, we can change what they mean. We can change how they shape us. We can change how they direct us. We can't erase what happened in the past, but we can redeem it. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once put it, "We can redeem [the] past – if we take our tears and use them to sensitise us to the tears of others."<sup>3</sup>

The forgiveness that Joseph offers is one tangible example of that. Joseph doesn't say that he's going to forget it ever happened. He doesn't say that it doesn't matter anymore or that it wasn't that bad. He says, "Have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." Joseph won't turn back to the brothers was of revenge and retaliation, but he will use the gifts God has given him to treat them as if they were made in the image of God. Because they are. That's what forgiveness is. If stewardship is how we care for the gift of God's creation, forgiveness is how we care for the gift of one another. It's how we continue God's work of creation and bring it to its fulfillment.

Reflecting on her work on the 9/11 memorial, Amanda Sacks said, "The one adjacency that we didn't get is the one that I'm that I'm remembering." For Sacks, the adjacency she couldn't get to work was an error. But it really wasn't. In fact, it's probably the most theologically significant attribute of the memorial. Because it reminds us that the past may be behind us, but history is never truly closed, finished, and complete. It's always open to being reshaped, retold, and redeemed. As Joseph puts it, "You intended it for harm, but God has transformed it into good."

And so it is today. Hate into forgiveness. Famine into banquet. Death into life.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>3</sup> "Address by the Chief Rabbi to The Lambeth Conference," *Rabbi Sacks* (blog), July 28, 2008, <https://rabbisacks.org/address-by-the-chief-rabbi-to-the-lambeth-conference/>.