

SERMON TITLE: "Forgiveness: Controlling Our Rage"
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 37:1-12, 19-28
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 17, 2021 at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

We've all been hearing a lot of details about the angry mob that stormed our U.S. Capitol on January 6th. As various persons are being identified from their pictures, video, and other communications—arrests have been made, and some of the attackers have been described in news stories. One man, who drove to Washington, DC, from Colorado had written a text message saying that he was going to "put a bullet in [Nancy Pelosi's] noggin on Live TV." The weapons he took with him included multiple handguns, an "assault rifle, and hundreds of rounds of ammunition."*

Our American First Amendment right to express outrage in words and through peaceful assembly is one thing. The use of violent assaults and threats with deadly weapons is quite another. Some cry foul at those who have wanted to impeach, arrest, limit, and punish—saying that it's in the nation's better interest that we quickly forgive and move on. But the lack of remorse and apology, and the necessary massive deployment of National Guard and other law enforcement at the U.S. and 50 state capitols, indicates that forgiveness is an issue for the other side, as well. Upset by an electoral defeat, changes in demographics, and shifts away from traditional patterns of privilege—many Americans are stinging with hurt and loss, and want to lash out and get even. The rage is palpable and frightening.

Over the past several weeks, we've been talking about forgiveness as a New Year's resolution that is both worthy of our faithful efforts and fraught with serious challenges. Using the story of King Herod's threat against young Jesus, we discussed that fleeing from danger might be an essential first step before forgiveness could happen. And, last Sunday—using the story of Jacob's wives Leah and

Rachel—we discussed how, before we can forgive, we might have to do some wrestling with shame. Today, we're heading back into that Genesis soap opera of Jacob's family for a closely-related, but slightly-different, lesson on forgiveness. This time, I invite you to consider with me that another requirement for forgiveness is controlling our rage.

1—BIBLE STORY BACKGROUND

There's no small amount of irritation, stress, frustration, and anger in this story. As you heard last Sunday, the family of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel—plus their two maid servants—eventually produced 12 sons, from whom came the 12 tribes of Israel. While their father Jacob unhappily worked out his grievances with his Uncle Laban, and their mothers wrestled with shame, it's no wonder that their sons grew up with similar problems. In Genesis 37, we see that son Joseph was 17 years old, and his ten older brothers were extremely jealous of him. The gift of a special robe was only one proof of many that Joseph was their father's favorite son, and for that reason they hated him.

Then, to make matters worse, Joseph flagrantly told his brothers about the two dreams he had had. As interpreted by Joseph's brothers and even their father, this son number 11 was presuming to reign over their entire family, making them bow down before him. Of course, that arrogant assertion was not well received. Afterward, the older brothers hated Joseph all the more. Many of the brothers became so enraged at Joseph that they actually wanted to kill him.

But, what I want you to hear today is that they did **not** kill their younger brother. It wouldn't be right to say that they forgave him yet, but—as a collective family—they took steps that might be necessary before forgiveness can happen. Years later, they *were* able to forgive, reconcile, and avoid starvation because, in this chapter of Genesis 37, they managed to stop short of their murderous intentions. *Eventually*, forgiveness was possible for this family because of some specific actions they took here to calm tempers, check their impulses, and manage their anger. Let's spell those out, so we might learn some ways of controlling our rage.

2—WAYS TO CONTROL RAGE

We begin with Father Jacob's response in verses 10 and 11. Even though Jacob's pattern had been to favor young Joseph, *these* verses do not tell us that Father Jacob forgave Joseph for exalting himself over his family. These verses do not indicate that Jacob overlooked, denied, condoned, made excuses for, lied, or approved of what Joseph said or did. Instead, Jacob took an important action. Recognizing that Joseph was provoking his older brothers, that he was creating a dangerous situation, and that Joseph was jeopardizing the well-being of the whole extensive family, Father Jacob used his paternal power to put his 11th son in his place. The only way forgiveness would ever come would be by first controlling the rage. So Jacob used his authority as the head of the household to rebuke Joseph and challenge his right to behave as if he were the high and mighty ruler over their whole family.

When the scales of justice and power are tipped toward one person or group over another, everyone is at risk of toppling over. Too much quick forgiveness can actually make matters more complicated in the long run. So we would do well to follow the example of Father Jacob and exercise whatever measure of authority we have to put bullies in their place and see that everyone gets treated fairly. I know we don't think we have power, but we do. As followers of Jesus, as mature and thoughtful persons, and as educated citizens, we have the authority and responsibility to speak truth to those who are out of line and to hold them accountable.

Unfortunately, this good action that Father Jacob took was probably too little, too late. So, it's no wonder that, when the older brothers were out herding their sheep, they decided it was time to get even with that young punk Joseph. Away from their father's protective eye, they could let loose with their rage, and put an end to Joseph's irritating nonsense. According to verses 18-20, when the brothers saw Joseph coming near, their first impulse was to kill him and throw his dead body into a pit.

Fortunately, **this time, it was Reuben** who intervened and stopped them from killing Joseph. Reuben used his authority as the eldest brother to remind his younger siblings of a basic Jewish ethic. It

isn't worded in this chapter as "Thou shalt not kill," but the idea is the same. In verses 21-22, Reuben said, "Let us not take his life, "Shed no blood," and "Lay no hand on him." It is technically possible to forgive a dead person, but, in most cases, the better step toward forgiveness is to make sure there is someone left alive who can be forgiven.

I've been a pastor long enough to know that even church-attending people struggle with the temptation to murder. In my first pastoral appointment, I heard stories about a murder-suicide of a married couple that used to sing in the church choir. Later, one of my clergy colleagues was murdered in her church parking lot. As we've seen on the news this past week, it's far too easy for even professing Christian people to get caught up in angry emotions, the hysteria of a crowd, and the words of a favorite leader. That's why we have long-standing, bedrock religious commandments and civic laws to help us in controlling our rage.

A third way of controlling our rage is seen in the action of **brother Judah**, who used the technique of compromise. Aware that his brothers were still thinking about murder, Judah appealed to their other interests. "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?" he asked. Rather than murder their own flesh and blood and bear that guilt, they could, instead, sell him to the caravan of traders from Egypt. That way, they would get rid of Joseph from their lives *and* earn 20 pieces of silver.

Selling a person into slavery and profiting from another person's demise don't seem like very forgiving tactics. And I hope you don't think I'm endorsing those kinds of behaviors. But, I have to say that, compared to murder, those *were* better options. Whenever I hear of someone who has killed or beat up their spouse, I always wonder, "Why didn't they just get a divorce?" When someone feels discriminated against in the workplace, instead of bringing a gun and shooting the co-workers, why don't they file a lawsuit? Instead of blowing up a building in an act of terrorism, why don't they write letters to the editor and lobby their legislators? When a person is feeling like they are out of control to

the point that they might violently hurt or murder someone, why don't they go instead to the nearest hospital and turn themselves in to the psych unit?

I know that there are times when we feel so offended that it seems like we have to hurry up and do something—anything—even if it's wrong. Well, I'm telling you today that there are a million things we can do that are more forgiving than mortal bodily harm. We are not wild animals backed into a corner. We are intelligent human beings, and we always have options. Even when we are feeling overwhelmed by anger and don't think we can control ourselves completely, hopefully we can rein in our rage with some kind of forgiving compromise.

CONCLUSION

What happened in Washington, D.C. on January 6 was pretty clearly a result of a lack of forgiveness. President Trump hasn't been able to accept his loss in the election, and many of his supporters haven't been able to accept it either. And, so, it has fallen to others to take steps to control the rage. Most of us long for unity and healing for our nation. But before reconciliation and forgiveness can occur, the rage has to be calmed down.

So I call on all of us to do our part. Like Father Jacob, let's use the authority we have to stop enabling bullies and to speak truth. Like eldest son Reuben, let's remind our brothers and sisters about God's commandment and our nation's laws against murder and assault. And like Judah, let's talk about the values of compromise. Not everything has to be carried out to an extreme. For the good of our nation, for the good of our community, for the good of our family, for the good of our own selves, let's work on forgiveness by controlling our rage.

*<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/us/pelosi-cleveland-grover-meredith.html>