

SERMON TITLE: "Forgiveness: Making Fruit from Misfortune"  
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 41:46-52  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: January 24, 2021, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you to see what immediately comes into your mind. Ready? Here goes. Have you ever bought a lemon?

Most of you probably thought quickly of a little yellow fruit, right? Maybe some of your minds whizzed past the fruit to something else, like a car that didn't work very well. If you lived in the U.S. in the 1920s, and you understood the slang of that era, you might have thought I was talking about a scam or a hustle. Back then, a "lemon" was the fast talk and deceitful trick that created victims. All those secondary associations derive from the idea that a lemon is a sour fruit that is somewhat painful to eat. Eating a lemon can make your face contort in discomfort. Thus, the brightly colored and innocent little fruit packed full of Vitamin C became a symbol of an unfortunate and painful life experience.

Misfortune and suffering are common human experiences; however, not everyone reacts the same way to life's lemons. While some people become sourpusses and remain bitter, others are able to forgive the offense and regain their sweet composure. Thus was born the positive admonition, "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade."

Of course, making a positive out of a negative can be challenging. That's why we're spending this whole month of January talking about the topic of forgiveness. In this series of sermons, we've been reading the painful story of Jacob, Leah, Rachel, and their 12 sons. In that dysfunctional biblical family, there were a whole lot of sour lemons. Today, we continue the story in Genesis chapter 41. Let's see how Joseph turned his lemons into lemonade. Or, to put that in the words of this scripture, let's see how Joseph moved toward forgiveness by making fruit from misfortune.

## 1—PASSING OF TIME

The first fruit-making pointer we see in this scripture is that forgiveness is often easier with the passing of time. In last week's story, Joseph was only 17 years old. Genesis 41:46 tells us that Joseph is now 30. Thirteen years had passed since Joseph's older brothers nearly killed him, but then decided to sell him into slavery instead. During his 13 years in Egypt, Joseph had experienced loss of liberty as a slave. He was also falsely accused of sexual misconduct and unjustly imprisoned for more than two of those years. So many terrible things happened to Joseph that it would have been easy to understand if he never forgave his brothers for the hardship and misfortunes they caused him. But, somehow, with the passing of time, there was also the possibility for Joseph to mature and put things in perspective.

I'm reminded of the children's book *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. In that one day, elementary-aged Alexander wakes up with chewing gum stuck in his hair, his best friend abandons him, his teacher criticizes his singing, the dentist discovers he has a cavity, Alexander has to eat lima beans for dinner, and everything else that happens to him in that day is just as bad or worse. Alexander thinks he'd like to move to Australia, where, presumably, life would be much better. But, just before he goes to sleep that night, Alexander's mother consoles him with the more-mature perspective that, even in Australia, people have really bad days sometimes.

By passing time, we give ourselves a chance to step back and realize that the horrible crisis is just one really bad day among many other days that are much better. One day, one week, one year, or even one decade doesn't necessarily define who we are. With the passing of time, we can see that that awful atrocity, incomprehensible injustice, or perverse pain is not all there is to life. Like the perspective we get from our financial advisors regarding our stock portfolios, we shouldn't freak out about every down day, down quarter, or even down year. We should be in this for the long haul. If we can be patient, eventually there will be relief from our misfortunes. Even if it's hard to see right now, forgiveness *will be* more possible with the passing of time.

## **2—PURSUING OPPORTUNITY**

The second fruit-making pointer we see in this scripture passage is that forgiveness will be easier if we have been pursuing opportunity. Just because *time* is passing doesn't mean we should be passive. During his 13 years in Egypt, Joseph used every opportunity to improve his situation. Joseph made fruit from his misfortunes by using his talents and developing his relationships. When Joseph was taken as a slave, he was purchased by Potiphar, the Egyptian captain of the guard. Instead of spending his time at Potiphar's house crying about his terrible plight or rebelling against his slavery, Joseph used his skills for good. Genesis chapter 39 tells us that Joseph's master quickly noticed Joseph's abilities, and Potiphar put Joseph in charge of his household and all his possessions and land.

When Joseph was later wrongly imprisoned, he could have bitterly refused to help anyone else. But, instead, he offered his dream-interpretation skills to help some of his fellow prisoners. That good deed later provided Joseph an opportunity to interpret the dreams of the Pharaoh himself. Again, Joseph jumped at the chance to serve others and improve his own lot in life. Because the Pharaoh was so pleased with Joseph's abilities, the Pharaoh then gave Joseph authority and responsibility to manage all the agriculture and food distribution in Egypt through seven years of good harvests followed by seven years of famine. That position of power was second only to the Pharaoh himself.

Yes, Joseph had suffered as a slave and prisoner, and he could easily have gotten stuck in unforgiveness and bitterness. Joseph could have kept to himself, nursing his wounds. Or he could have lashed out at others, in response to the ways he had been hurt. But, instead, Joseph made himself likeable and useful. Instead of wasting time thinking about all the people who had done him wrong, Joseph spent his time designing, implementing, and overseeing a tremendous agricultural program that saved the Egyptian people and others from starvation. When your head and your hands are engaged in being fruitful, you don't have time to dwell on all the hardships and misfortunes. That's why forgiveness is easier if you busy yourself pursuing opportunity.

### **3—SPREADING SEEDS OF CONTENTMENT**

In this scripture, a third fruit-making pointer toward forgiveness is spreading seeds of contentment. Genesis 41:50-52 tells about the birth of Joseph's two sons. Joseph named the first one "Manasseh," which means "making to forget." Joseph named his second son "Ephraim," which means "to be fruitful." Because earlier circumstances of his life had hurt him so badly, Joseph could have passed that pain on to the next generation. He could have named his sons "Hardship" and "Bitterness." Instead, Joseph saw the birth of his sons as opportunities to forget the pain and misfortune of the past. Joseph's positive approach not only made fruit for himself, but also planted seeds of contentment, fruitfulness, and forgiveness in the lives of his children.

The way Joseph described this new phase of his life reminds me of some other passages of scripture. The New Testament Letter to the Philippians was written by the Apostle Paul while he was in prison for preaching the Christian gospel. Paul could have easily spent his jail time railing against that injustice, feeling sorry for himself, and writing bitter words about those who had put him there. Instead, he dedicated himself to writing inspirational and encouraging words to the Christians at Philippi. To those beloved children in the faith, Paul wrote about things true, honorable, just, pleasing, commendable, and worthy of praise. Paul appreciated the Philippians' distress and concern for him. But he also expressed to them that he had learned to be content in all kinds of situations and circumstances. Paul wrote, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil. 3:8-13).

That same kind of idea is also present in the writings of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. Approximately six hundred years before Christ, the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and took a large segment of the Jewish people into exile in Babylon. Those prisoners of war were absolutely distraught with fear, grief, anger, loss, and uncertainty. In their sorrowful situation, the exiles could have gotten stuck in all kinds of unforgiving heartache, teaching their children to hate their oppressors for generations to come. But, through the prophet Jeremiah, God urged them instead to "build houses and

live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce; . . . multiply there, and do not decrease . . . Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:5-7).

Do you hear what’s happening in all those scriptures? Instead of promoting pain and unforgiveness, each one—Joseph, Paul, and Jeremiah—basically said, the hurt stops here. What I’m going to think about, talk about, and write about is contentment. I’m not going to continue being a victim, and I’m not going to reproduce this anger and hatred in the next generations. Instead, I’m going to encourage my children and my spiritual offspring to think about positive things, to get along with the people in their lives, and to move into the future with happy feelings and inspirational ideas. Rather than spreading ill-will that keeps the battles raging for generations to come, I’m going to spread contentment for the good future of my children, my church, my community, and my world.

We make fruit out of misfortune by spreading seeds of contentment. And that’s how forgiveness will come.

### **CONCLUSION**

There’s a song in our United Methodist hymnal that goes like this:

*Faith, while trees are still in blossom,  
plans the picking of the fruit;  
faith can feel the thrill of harvest  
when the buds begin to sprout.  
Long before the dawn is breaking,  
faith anticipates the sun.  
Faith is eager for the daylight,  
for the work that must be done.\**

The word “forgiveness” doesn’t occur in that hymn, but the faith that “plans the picking of the fruit” is the way to get there. If we’re struggling with forgiveness, maybe it’s time for us to get busy making fruit from misfortune.

\*Lyrics by Anders Frostenson, 1960; translated by Fred Kaan, 1972, c. 1976 Hope Publishing Co.