

12th Sunday after Pentecost

Gen. 45

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Aug. 16, 2026

Most of us, if we are honest, would probably agree that the word “forgiveness” is both one of the most beautiful and the most challenging words in the English language... Who of us has not longed to hear the words “I forgive you” spoken to us at one time or another? Who of us has not struggled mightily to say those same words to someone who has hurt us?

Any of us who’ve been in therapy or in a twelve-step program will know that learning to forgive others and ourselves is part of the path to meaningful healing... An understanding affirmed in the words of Maya Angelou who said, **“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and to discover the prisoner was you.”**

And any of us who have been raised in the Christian tradition will know that a core tenet of our faith (reaching back to the Hebrew Scriptures and forward to Jesus’ commandment to forgive someone who has wronged you not once or twice, but seven times seventy times)... Any of us raised in the Christian tradition will know that forgiveness, along with its companion word “reconciliation” are at that heart of it all...

(Although, lest we imagine that these ancient texts suppose an ease about this thing called forgiveness or that they assume a human

propensity for relational harmony, let us remember that we have spent this entire summer learning otherwise, as we have heard stories from the book of Genesis about the relationships through three generations of Abraham's family, and have found those relationships to be full of deceit, discord, envy, hatred, mistrust and fear...

All of that animosity leading eventually to the story of Joseph, Jacob's favorite of his twelve sons, who was thrown into a pit and left for dead by his envious brothers, then found by mercenaries and sold into slavery in Egypt, where Joseph, through his own charisma and God's guidance, gained the Pharaoh's favor and rose to some stature and responsibility in the halls of power...

The ending of that story being our first lesson for this morning... One of the most revered and beloved story endings in the Bible, capturing that moment when, after years of separation and exile, Joseph extended forgiveness to his brothers in an unfathomable gesture of reconciliation and mercy...

A beautiful story, but when read in isolation, without acknowledging the deeper currents of relational dysfunction that ran through all the generations of Abraham's family, prevents readers from recognizing both the truth about the complexity and the fragility of human relationships **and** the blessed, oftentimes agonizing journey required for repairing what has been broken.

You might think that a pastor would, after years of study and thought, eventually have something clear and helpful, edifying and instructive to say about a word so central to our faith as forgiveness... Maybe even a little "how-to" manual for people to take home after worship...

But I don't have either of the above. Because perhaps, like you, in terms of understanding what forgiveness really means and how to go about it, I am still very much a work in progress...

There is an image though that I find myself returning to often when I want to consider the meaning and the process of forgiveness... an image that comes clear for me in three very different stories set in three very different times and places...

The first being a story told by Lutheran pastor Walter Wangerin... A small story... a seemingly inconsequential story about two brothers in the Midwest somewhere who had been estranged from one another for years and years, much to the sadness of their sister Flo, who yearned deeply for their reconciliation... She'd tried now and then to get one or other of the brothers to reach out to the other. But to no avail.

And so, as Walter Wangerin tells the story, one day Aunt Flo (which is what everyone called her), unbeknownst to either brother, invited both brothers to come to her house for supper... Which both did, quickly realizing the untenable situation in which they found themselves, and taking their places across the table from one another in stony silence, trying to out-do one another in the length of their silent table graces... Neither brother lifting their head from that "place of stubborn prayer"... neither saying anything as Aunt Flo brought the supper things to the table...

Not until that is, as the story goes... not until Aunt Flo put the gravy on the table... That gravy bringing to mind for each brother the memory of their mother's gravy... The smell of that gravy and the memory of their mother lifting each brother's head, ever so slightly, but enough for them to see one another, to look at one another, and to

offer a glimpse of something *possible*... something with a future not forever bound by the animosities and divisions of the past...

Not really a “success” story if what we’re hoping for is a sure and certain happy ending complete with trumpet fanfare. But a story with a hint of something that might be possible through the power of plain old ordinary gravy and the memory of a mother who had so many times called to both of her beloved sons saying, “Supper is ready”...

What I love about the way Walter Wangerin tells the story is how forgiveness sometimes goes to work at the edges of things, moving slowly and carefully, coming into the dining room that day “slant” (to use a phrase of Emily Dickenson) instead of “full on”... (Meaning its meaning can’t be limited or reduced to the standard formula of “OK, I forgive you,” but moves in ways that open possibilities not yet imagined...)

What I love about the story is that it confirms what Episcopal Bishop Mariann Budde once said when she wrote, “What forgiveness sometimes requires is not effort, but openness... It feels like letting go, relinquishing control, and letting God in”...

What I love about the story is the image about which I spoke earlier... an image also seen in a story that took place on an evening more than thirty years ago right here in Downeast Maine when people from both Sedgwick and Brooklin, bitterly estranged from one another following the dissolution of their joint school district, gathered in the Sedgwick Elementary School Gymnasium for a baked bean supper to benefit the family of Reggie Sherman, the Brooklin-born young father of three who had drowned while out fishing a few weeks before...

Reggie Sherman, who had been the beloved Little League coach for the team once made up of kids from both towns before the two towns divorced and made the kids separate into two teams, one representing the town of Brooklin and the other the town of Sedgwick...

People from both towns gathering on that evening in the Sedgwick School Gymnasium to mourn Reggie's passing, to pay their respects to his family, and to grapple together with the hard cold reality of the sea's monstrous capacity for taking the life of someone so dear... someone who knew the sea like the back of his hand...

So on that evening families from both towns came to the Sedgwick Elementary School gymnasium, bringing beans and casseroles and coleslaw and pies... taking their places at tables as one community, just as they had in days gone by... The smell of fir trees and clam flats, chainsaw oil and wood smoke lingering on their clothes along with the smell of coffee and supper, and maybe even a little whiff of cigarettes and Allen's Coffee Brandy... And the Little League kids sitting together wearing the t-shirts they had worn while Reggie was still their coach, with the words "Sedgwick **and** Brooklin" both emblazoned across the back....

Everyone in that room joined together by a sense of respect and gratitude for Reggie Sherman... Everyone in that room reaching across the divisions between them not from a place of sure-footedness and strength, but from a place of loss and grief and vulnerability.... And some of us sensing (I know because I could see it in faces across the room)... some of us sensing in that shared loss and grief **the possibility of relationship where there had been none as walls that evening were**

turned on their sides to make tables and people saw something in one another they hadn't seen for a very long time...

This image of walls that had once separated people from one another being turned on their sides to make tables where people can sit across from each other being the image I often turn to when trying to figure out the meaning and the process of forgiveness...

Clearly it's not the endpoint or some glorious 100 percent guaranteed resolution to a discordant and divisive old story...**But rather the beginning of a possibility born from a decision not to let the past dictate the future...** a decision not to be held captive by the old animosities and hurts and wounds that once created a seemingly impenetrable wall between people...

Walls into tables, allowing for the possibility of something new to take shape, however slowly and haltingly that might be...

Which, goodness knows, can be very slow and very halting and sometimes even very painful... I mean, who knows what the relationship between Aunt Flo's brothers was like after the smell of their mother's gravy opened their eyes to see each other, however briefly? And who knows if some of the folks from Sedgwick and Brooklin looked at one another differently after the evening they shared in the Sedgwick School Gymnasium? And really, to return to our story from Genesis, who knows what the relationship between Abraham's descendants was in the generations that followed Joseph's astounding forgiveness of the brothers who had left him for dead in that pit?

Who knows? Because we are all flawed human beings... To be truthful, we are all a friggin' mess... sometimes longing deeply for the sound of forgiveness... sometimes caught in relationships that are so

complex it's not always clear who should be granting forgiveness and who should be receiving it... Sometimes recognizing that those we would most like to ask forgiveness of are no longer living... And sometimes enmeshed in situations where the wounds are so deep the walls of separation have to stay in place simply for self-preservation...

So you see, I have no easy answers or how-to manuals when it comes to the meaning or the process of forgiveness...

- I only know that somewhere in the mysterious wilderness of giving and receiving forgiveness there is freedom to be found... So it's important not to forget Maya Angelou's little word of wisdom, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and to discover the prisoner was you."
- I only know that sometimes forgiveness goes to work at the edges of things, moving slowly and carefully, coming into our lives "slant" instead of "full on"... So it's important to keep our eyes and ears and hearts open to the things at the edges... Because you never know when the smell of gravy or the sight of a T-shirt with Brooklin **and** Sedgwick emblazoned across the back will make something possible that wasn't possible just a minute before...
- I only know, as Bishop Marion Budde says, that what forgiveness sometimes requires is not effort, but openness... letting go, relinquishing control, and letting God in... So it's important to know those places where there's a good chance we might actually let God in...

Which leads me to the third story... the story about a God whose very being is about turning walls on their sides to make of them a table... a table where all of God's children have a place...A table of mercy, of invitation and inclusion... A table to which we are all welcome, no matter how many walls we've erected between ourselves and others, ourselves and God... A table where, by grace and love those walls are deemed to be of no consequence and we are set free from the past to live into new possibilities...

A table where we receive into our hands a piece of bread and hear the words, "the body of Christ, the bread of heaven" assuring us that between God and us there is no between... Assuring us that Emmanuel God with us is with us through it all, finding ways of coming into our lives slant, at the edges to set us free...

So we too might sometimes look up from where we are sitting in cold hard silence and look into the eyes of the one sitting across from us and see something we hadn't seen before...

Or we too might hear something we've needed so desperately to hear... As I do when I remember the last time I gave my late husband Michael communion or stood next to him to receive it together and hear **here at the table** those words from Wendell Berry...

*This then is that image of heaven about which we have heard,
Where those who love each other have forgiven each other, (2X)
And where for that the leaves are green,
The light a music in the air,
And all is unentangled,*

And all is undismayed...

What better way to end this sermon than with a prayer then... a prayer that God might work in us what we cannot work in ourselves... And what better prayer could there be than one offered in song, written and sung by Chelsea... The lyrics go like this...

**Turn these walls into tables
Forgive us more than we are able
Don't let the past define what we could be
There's no easy road ahead,
There's nothing sure, except
We're all welcome at your table, Lord.**