

**Forgiveness: The Dreamcoat**  
Romans 8:28 & Genesis 50:15-21  
March 15, 2015 ~ Rev. Jo Ramsey

---



I don't know about you, but I have been challenged during this season of Lent as I reflect on the stones I carry. Since Ash Wednesday, we've been using the image of a backpack to represent our souls. To some degree, all of us have stones that we lug around with us in our backpacks – they are the weight we carry because of the wrongs done to us and the wrongs we have done to others.



There are stones of all sizes, from pebbles to rocks to boulders --- and whether they are petty or painful, they can add up. They become our companions. We get them out and polish them, spend time with them. You know---take inventory of the ways we've been hurt, stew over things, rationalize our part. We get attached to our stones, and may even believe they protect us. But, the truth is, they will eventually become a burden to us and keep us from moving forward.



Family members give and take these stones just like everyone else. In fact, because families spend so much time together in close proximity and navigate so many intimate moments together through all the phases of life, families probably exchange more than their share. It also may be because we feel safe or we take family for granted or we're just careless. Brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles – most families are practically expert stone masons!

We even pass our stones down to our children! The Bible says 'the sins of our fathers are remembered to the third and fourth generation.' Talk about a big inheritance!

Today in worship we are exploring the story of Joseph—who came from a family with a complicated, messy past. Their story is spread through the book of Genesis. Within this convoluted tale, which reads like a soap opera, is the first use in the Bible of the word **forgive**, and the family was certainly in need of it.

**Abraham**  
**Isaac**  
**Jacob**  
**Joseph**

The story begins with Joseph's great-grandparents, Abraham and Sarah, who set the unpleasantness in motion by sending Abraham's son Ishmael away so that their son Isaac could be the favored child. Isaac marries Rebecca, who gives birth to twins named Esau and Jacob. Isaac loves Esau, but Rebecca loves Jacob, so she and Jacob deceive Isaac and cheat Esau out of his birthright.

**I'm  
Dad's  
Favorite**

When Jacob marries Leah and Rachel and begins having children with them and their maidservants, it's not a complete surprise that he follows the long-standing family tradition of picking a favorite child of his own.

That child is Joseph, son of Rachel, his favorite wife. Joseph has 11 brothers and 1 sister, but from the beginning, everyone knows that Joseph is the special son. Joseph soon discovers that being favorite is a decidedly mixed blessing.



When Joseph turns 17, Isaac gives him a beautiful coat of many colors. That robe sets in motion a 'series of unfortunate events.' Joseph's brothers resent him for that coat. And their bitterness grows into hatred. Joseph seems oblivious to their feelings—and begins blathering on about a series of dreams which suggest that he is superior and his family will bow down to him.

His brothers' anger builds up until one day as Joseph strolls toward them across the pastures, they decide to kill him. "Here comes the dreamer," they scoff. "Let's do away with him and see what becomes of his dreams!"

Fortunately, the oldest son, Reuben insists they spare Joseph's life. The brothers reluctantly agree, but still, they strip him of his colorful coat, toss him in a pit for the time being, and sit down to lunch. Just then a slave trading caravan passes by, and the brothers decide to sell Joseph. So, they rip his beautiful coat, dip it in goat's blood and tell Jacob a wild animal ate Joseph. Their father's heart is broken. Joseph, the favored son, is gone forever.

Joseph and Jacob both dump medium-sized stones on Joseph's brothers---a lot of them. The playing favorites. The coat of many colors. The offensive dreams. The brothers' reaction to all those stones is to give Joseph a huge stone, nearly a tombstone!



Joseph's story reminds us that there is no perfect family! There are no perfect parents, just as there are no perfect children or siblings. You don't have them. Neither do I. When we think of our parents, most of us appreciate the nurture and love we received. But we likely also remember some disappointments and pain. Joseph undoubtedly was grateful that Jacob had loved him so much, but probably came to understand that his father's love had both positively and negatively shaped his life story.

What about us? How have our families shaped us? Have your parents or siblings pitched some stones your way? What would they say about you? Do their backpacks contain any rocks with your name on them? While we may not have endured all that Joseph did, there's a good chance that every one of us has some family rocks in our backpack.

Let's start with the small stuff—the pebbles. Perhaps you have a parent that gives you advice all the time or a big brother that doesn't return your emails or an aunt that corrects your English or a grandmother that tells you your hair is too long and hangs in your face (ok, that was me!). We can let these little irritations pile up until our backpacks are full, and then it's tough to maintain any relationship. We have to consciously let go of the little pebbles.

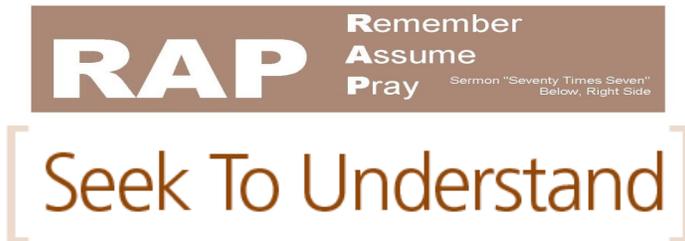
This is where the RAP method that Pastor James explained last week works well. We **REMEMBER** that we also have shortcomings. We **ASSUME** the best about the other person. We **PRAY** for God's blessing on them. This simple process can help us get past the small stuff.



But, not every stone is a pebble. There are bigger rocks that families pass around – hurtful words, disrespect, disappointments and slights that you can't shake off. Maybe you were ignored or made to feel you weren't as important as your sibling. Jacob loaded his sons' backpacks with medium-sized stones in just this way. He provided enough stones to build a wall between Joseph and his brothers. This happens all the time in families, and when there is no repentance, we pile those stones around us to protect us and the emotional barrier becomes a wall.



There are two ways to break down those walls. One way is to be honest about your experience and how it has made you feel. Sometimes that works, and the person who has hurt us is able to hear and acknowledge and apologize. Other times the offender just doesn't get it. In that case, you have to decide if you want to tear down the wall yourself. If you're going to have any relationship at all with this person, you have to deal with it and make peace.



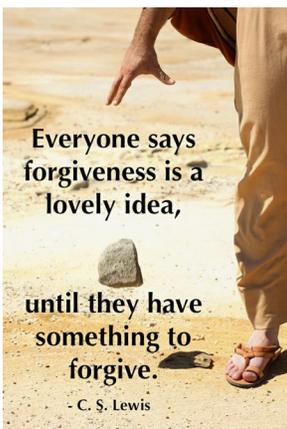
This is where we add an S to our RAP. S as in **SEEK** to understand. Sometimes, when we understand why someone behaves as they do, we can begin to let go of what they've done.

I know a family, a group of siblings whose father was distant. He never told his children he loved them and he wasn't affectionate. Even as adults, their father's indifference hurt them. One day their aunt explained that their father had been abused as a boy. When he misbehaved, he had been locked in a closet, left there in the dark, sometimes for hours.



Their father never did such a thing to them. He had vowed never to abuse his own children, and he succeeded. But, that was as far as he got. When his children understood what their father had been through, it didn't fix everything. But, they were finally able to say, "Our father did the best he could."

Unfortunately, some of us here carry around really big stones, like that father experienced. Abuse, addiction, abandonment on the part of parents. Or perhaps modern-day prodigal children who take from their parents, live irresponsibly and squander what they've been given.



These are not the kind of stones where you can say, "Oh good. I've heard some sermons on forgiveness. I know all about the RAPS process. I'm just going to let this all go. I'm just going to pray and it will all be gone." Oh how I wish!!! As someone said to me this week, talking about forgiveness is one thing, doing it is another!

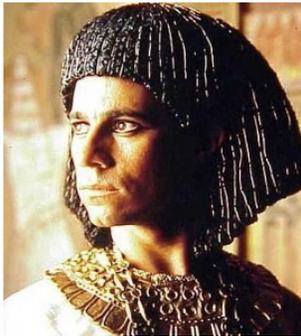


Forgiving these big stones is a whole different story! There are ways to move forward and begin to chip away at these stones. Often it begins with therapy or a support group. Maybe a friend or partner helps us carry our burdens for awhile, as we gain the strength we need to let go. Often, we must confront the family member who has wounded us---write a letter, talk face to face or visit a graveside and share our anger and pain.



Our faith can help us through this process too. During prayer, we can ask God to heal us and imagine him chipping away at the stones in our lives. Some people find taking communion very meaningful. One woman I know said tasting the bread and cup made her feel like the Holy Spirit was filling her heart and washing away the past.

Still others find healing by looking for ways to bring something good from their pain. They ask God to let them help others with similar suffering, so that their pain might have meaning. This idea brings us back to Joseph and the rest of his story.



You remember where we left off – Joseph has been sold into slavery. He arrives in Egypt with a heavy load of stones. From favorite son to nameless slave. Chances are he doesn't forget being stripped of his precious coat, his brothers' hateful plans, the darkness of the pit, the long, humiliating trip to captivity. Yet, somehow Joseph thrives. God is with him and blesses him. He rises to a high level of responsibility in the household of Potiphar, a general in Pharaoh's court.

After he is falsely accused and sent to prison, he rises in stature there, as well. About this time, Joseph, the dreamer, begins interpreting dreams again. His insights help the Pharaoh prepare for famine, and eventually he is made the chief governor of Egypt. He leads Egypt's efforts to prepare for the famine and oversees food distribution when it arrives.

The famine comes to Canaan too. Joseph's brothers are forced to go to Egypt to buy grain. They stand before the chief governor, who will determine whether they will live or die, not realizing it is none other than the brother they sold into slavery. His brothers bow down before him and ask to buy grain.

Joseph's life has come full circle. His dream from all those years ago has come to pass. After a series of tests and trips, the brothers return to Egypt, this time with their father. Eventually, they bow down before Joseph again and beg for forgiveness. As they name the stones they piled upon his life, Joseph begins to weep. Then they begin to weep as Joseph reassures them. "Do not be afraid. What you intended for evil, God intended for good."



Joseph sees God's hand in the midst of it all. He understands that because of all that has happened, he is in a position to save his family. Even though Joseph has good reasons to be angry, he chooses to forgive his brothers, and they are reconciled. Like the Apostle Paul, Joseph understands that God can make all things---even a messy, complicated family history---work together for good!

Some families are messier than others, and before we wrap it up, I have a special message for those of you who know what I'm talking about. I come from one of those families myself. --- I believe God can and will bring good from difficult and painful experiences. But I also believe that God does not necessarily intend or will or cause the mess in the first place. Abuse and addiction and mental illness are not something God plans for your life. There are other forces at work in this world. What God does intend is love and well-being and hope.



Forgiveness comes to us through God's grace, and probably some combination of therapy and truth-telling, spiritual healing and helping others. But however it comes to us, forgiveness doesn't mean what happened was ok. It doesn't excuse it. Those pebbles and stones that have been hurled at us, and that we carry for a season, shape who we are. Setting them down doesn't mean they didn't happen. It just means they don't define us. They don't have power over us, build walls around us or bind us.

Forgiveness allows us to give up hope of a different past, and to hope for a different, better future.

Last Sunday, we hummed along to John Prine's "Fish & Whistle" song which spoke of forgiving each other 'til we both turn blue! This week, I kept hearing another song about forgiveness by Matthew West. He sings...

Forgiveness  
It'll clear the bitterness away  
It can even set a prisoner free  
There is no end to what its power can do  
So, let it go and be amazed  
By what you see through eyes of grace  
The prisoner that it really frees is you...

Forgiveness is unlocking the door to set someone free and realizing **you** were the prisoner. May God chip away at all that keeps our hearts walled up and weighed down. May He make all things work together for good. May He help us let go of the past and discover hope for tomorrow. And may we find that forgiveness has set us free.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

