Two women had once been close friends in college, but afterward, their lives had taken different paths. A number of years later, their paths crossed, and they decided to have lunch together to catch up on each other’s life. As such reunions often do, this one went on for several hours. Suddenly they realized that they had talked through the afternoon and into the dinner hour. Since this was back in those antediluvian days before most people had cell phones, they couldn’t just quickly text their husbands, whom they imagined would be frantic with worry by this time, to let them know where they were. So they hurriedly took their leave, promising to phone each other the next day to pick up where they left off.

When they did, one said to the other, “Was your husband upset when you got home so late?”

“Oh, no, it was OK. I told him how I had run into an old school friend, and that we got carried away with our reunion, and he didn’t mind. How about yours?”

“Well,” the other woman replied, “my husband was so upset he became historical.”

“You mean hysterical, don’t you,” her friend said.

“No, I mean historical. He brought up everything I’ve done to make him angry in the past fifteen years.”

I suspect that all of us have a tendency to be historians of past injuries or wrongs that we’ve suffered at the hands of someone else. I’ll leave it to you to decide who’s the historian at your house.

Both of our scriptural texts for today tell us stories of people who had to make a decision about whether or not to forgive an offense against them or to become historical and get back at the one who did them wrong. The two stories begin at opposite ends of the exchange. The story of Joseph begins with the wrong done to him, while the parable of the Unforgiving Servant begins with his experience of being forgiven.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is probably better known to some of us from the musical “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat,” than the actual story in the Bible, where, depending on which translation you read, the dreamcoat in question was either a “coat of many colors,” or “a robe with long sleeves.” But whichever coat you prefer, it is a foundational story for both Jews and Christians, not only because Joseph and his brothers became the patriarchs of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, but also because of the perspective it offers for how we deal with our own history of hurts in light of our faith in God.

Joseph, the next-to-youngest son among Jacob’s brood, was one of those kids whom any normal sibling would resent or even hate. He was the family know-it-all, and fairly arrogant about it, and he was always telling his brothers about his dreams in which he usually emerged in some position of authority or fame over them. Plus, for some inexplicable reason, he was his father’s favorite; there were many good reasons for Joseph’s brothers to resent him.

One day, while out tending the sheep, they saw him coming, and some of them wanted immediately to just kill him, but Reuben the level-headed elder brother said, “No, we can’t do that. He’s our brother after all, so let’s rough him up a little to teach him a lesson, but don’t harm him. It would kill Dad.” So they stripped him of his “amazing technicolor dreamcoat” that his father had
given him (which was another reason for his brothers to resent him) and sold him to the a caravan of passing Bedouins to be taken to Egypt and re-sold at the slave market. They then ripped his dreamcoat and dipped it into some sheep’s blood to convince their elderly father he had been killed by a lion, figuring they’d seen and heard the last of Joseph. Of course we know that’s not going to be the case, or we wouldn’t still be telling this story three thousand years later.

It’s a classic rags-to-riches, defeat-to-triumph tale; after being falsely accused of rape, a lengthy prison sentence, and a weird stroke of luck when the Pharaoh discovers he has some real talent in deciphering dreams, he subsequently rises to the position of the Pharaoh’s right-hand man. Because he had correctly interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams to mean there would be seven years of bountiful harvests followed by seven years of famine, the Pharaoh put him in charge of food distribution for all of Egypt.

It’s at this point that we come to the end of the story in today’s text, when Joseph and his brothers have an unexpected reunion. The famine has extended up to Judea, and Jacob has sent his sons down to Egypt to see if they can trade sheepskins and wool for grain. Little do they suspect that Joseph is now a middle-aged Egyptian man who is second only to the Pharaoh himself in power. They don’t recognize him, of course, though he certainly recognizes them, and goes through an agony of soul searching as he wrestles with the question whether he’s going to “become historical” and get his own back on them, or whether he’s going to forgive them and try to heal the wounds of the past. It’s gripping reading.

Now comes the scene where he reveals his identity to his brothers. In a dramatic scene, he tells them who he is, and as we might expect, they are terrified. Well they might be. Given the way wrongs were righted in blood feuds, I’m certain their expectation and great fear was that he would simply order them and all their wives and children slaughtered, or at the very least, sold into slavery in the mines. They owe him an incalculable debt—their very lives, since that’s what they took, or thought they did, from him.

But Joseph has learned a lesson or two from the ups and downs he’s suffered, and he breaks down and weeps and says, Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves. You sold me here; but God sent me before you to preserve life during this famine. . . God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me, but God. . . Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve many people.”

Am I in the place of God? Well, yes, he was. And he exercises his godlike power in the way God does—he opts for forgiveness and reconciliation rather than revenge. He accepts the cost to himself of their wrongdoing—the wrenching separation from his family and tribe, the years of slavery and imprisonment. He chooses to focus, not on the hurt he suffered at the hands of his own family, but to focus instead on how his own tragedy has become an opportunity to do good, not only to his brothers who wronged him, but to hundreds and thousands of others who survive because of his wise administration of the food distribution. “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.”

In our gospel reading, Jesus tells a parable that approaches this whole matter of forgiveness from the other end—the main character is not someone who has been
greatly wronged, but someone who has just experienced an incredible act of forgiveness. The servant has just been forgiven a huge debt by his master that he was obviously not going to be able to pay (and this was in the days when you couldn’t write off bad debt on your corporate taxes and balance sheet). Ten thousand talents of silver may not sound like all that much to those of us who are used to reading about corporations that announce losses in the hundreds of millions or billions of dollars, or national debts in the trillions of dollars. But if we do the math, we discover that 10,000 talents was the equivalent of 150,000 years worth of wages for a daily laborer! Who could ever repay such a staggering debt? Who could ever have even incurred such a debt to begin with? Well, that’s the point you see. The debt is incalculable. It’s not only beyond any ability to repay, it’s beyond any ability even to comprehend. The master, in an act of generosity that is as incalculable as the debt itself, releases the servant from the debt and sets him free. He forgives him. We don’t have to be schooled in the subtleties of literary interpretation to see the obvious point that the generous creditor is God and the servant who owes the incalculable debt is humanity—all of us—do we?

But the servant, who himself is owed an amount by one of his fellow servants that is mere pocket-change, does not treat his debtor as he was treated by the wealthy man when he was in default. Instead, he has his fellow servant thrown into debtor’s prison until he pays every last penny. And immediately, finds himself in deep doo-doo. Now the freedom he was so graciously granted by his master when he forgave the servant’s enormous debt is snatched away from him, and he is thrown into prison until he can pay every penny, which, of course, he will never be able to do. The point of the parable is crystal clear: our own ability to experience the freedom of God’s forgiveness is indissolubly linked to our willingness to forgive others. And isn’t this, in fact, what we pray, Sunday after Sunday in the Lord’s Prayer—“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors?” It’s a prayer that is always granted. Or as Dag Hammarskjöld once put it, “Refusal to forgive others breaks the bridge over which we ourselves must pass.”

This is not to say that forgiveness is easy or cheap. To forgive someone, really forgive them, and not just sweep their wrongs under the rug and pretend they didn’t happen, is costly and often painful. No passive-aggressive games are allowed in real forgiveness. If you steal my chickens and I forgive you, I’m going hungry while you’re firing up the grill for a barbecue. When the wound we suffer from someone else is deep and painful, then forgiveness is not easy, but costly. Like Joseph, we have to accept the pain and loss inflicted on us in order to be able to confront the one who has wronged us in an attempt to heal the broken relationship and to find healing ourselves. And that takes courage and faith and sacrifice. It takes the kind of real trust in God that Joseph had to be able to say, “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” That doesn’t mean that God intends or approved the harm we suffer; it only means that we trust that God is not locked into our mode of operation, focused on crime and punishment, but rather all about reconciliation and renewal and transformation of both the offended and the offender. Isn’t that the meaning we see in the story of Jesus’ death—that in that death, undeserved but freely accepted, we see God’s choice to forgive and bear the cost of forgiveness for all the sins of humanity. That’s why the cross gradually came to be the central
symbol of our faith in a God who brings life and good and restoration out of death.

I still wrestle with how these deeply personal dynamics of forgiveness could have, or can now, inform our national response to the attacks we suffered on 9/11, and particularly for those who were personally devastated by the deaths of loved ones or colleagues. I think we’re all too aware that in our understandable need to strike back, we acted more like the unforgiving servant in the parable than like Joseph confronting his brothers. And how has that been working out for us?

But I take hope from some of the stories we’ve been hearing from many people on the radio and TV this past week or so despite all the atmosphere of a media feeding-frenzy. One of those stories concerns a colleague of mine from my years in New Jersey, who now serves a church in Red Bank. On 9/11, her younger brother was one of the 295 employees of Marsh and McClennan killed when the north tower fell. There’s a link to her story in the order of service this morning, so you can read it for yourself.

Suffice it to say that Myrna felt she was faced with a choice—to become an ardent advocate of the “war on terror” that we launched in retaliation for those attacks against our nation, or to become an ambassador for peace and reconciliation. Knowing her, I was not surprised at which choice she made. The year after the attacks, she traveled to Afghanistan as part of a peace mission and she has been an active participant in the organization called September Eleventh Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, which is dedicated to international and interfaith dialogue on alternatives to war, as well as efforts to counteract the growing backlash against American Muslims that is still taking place today. This year, she’s one of those selected to read part of the list of names of those killed in the attacks at the memorial service. Her public activism for peace is strange to her, since as anyone who knows her, knows what a quiet and private person she is—not at all one who is comfortable with a public profile.

When Osama bin Laden was killed several months ago, she was awakened in the middle of the night by a call from a reporter in New Zealand who had heard of her peace activism, asking for her comments. She simply said, “I’m not going to celebrate anyone’s dying.”

Forgiveness is possible; in fact it is essential if we are ever going to find healing for our hurts at the personal level and in the larger world. We won’t always know or see the best way to go about that, but we can be sure that if we are willing to seek reconciliation, we will be putting ourselves in position to see, as Joseph saw, that behind and in and through all the pain we suffer or inflict on others, God is at work to bring a larger and deeper healing to all of us. “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good, to preserve life for many.”