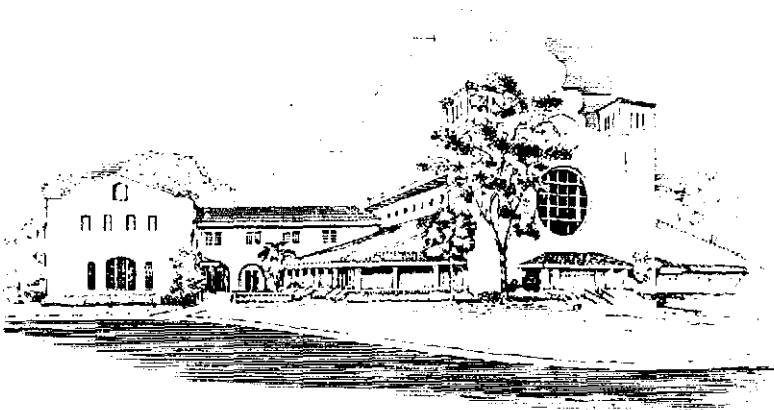


# First Church Pulpit

**"HOW TO FORGET THE PAST!"**

**Text:** "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardships."  
— (Genesis 41:51)



## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

401 SOUTHEAST FIFTEENTH AVENUE  
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA 33301

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RICHARD M. CROMIE, Minister

We start with Joseph, who from his birth, was the favorite son of his father. There were already ten sons in Jacob's family when he was born, and while he was still a boy, his father put Joseph in charge of his ten older brothers (That would make you angry, wouldn't it, if you happened to be one of the brothers?). And angry they surely were. One day he told the ten of them how he dreamed that they had knelt before him and paid homage to little Joseph: Not the kind of thing to create sibling harmony in a home, I can assure you. Another day (you remember), father Jacob sent Joseph out to check on the brothers to make sure that they were working, and not fooling around. He was dressed in his coat of many colors, made just for him by the finest tailors in town. His father's favorite son....

Now some brothers might put up with that for a little while, but they were not going to put up with it forever, right? So, when he arrived to see if they were about the work, they said, "Here comes the dreamer!" They took hold of him and beat him and they were about to kill him when the eldest brother (maybe that gives more sense) said, "There is no sense in killing him. Why don't we sell him? At least we will get some money for this little nuisance of a brother!" (That would be a good way to get rid of a problem child in your home! You are allowed to laugh.)

Poor Jacob... I don't know why he had a favorite son. Parents are not supposed

to do that. I hope he never regretted it.... But they took the coat of many colors, and dipped it in the blood of a goat, and brought it back to Jacob, and told him that his favorite son was dead. (If you know anything about the death of a child, you know how Jacob felt.) So, he wept, and he cried, and he could not believe, then he would not believe it, then he got angry... but finally he adjusted to it. But forty years later, when he met that son again, thinking that the boy had been dead all that time... well, he had never forgotten the grief. It was the happiest moment in the old man's life.

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Joseph, having been taken from the pit, was sold to the Ishmaelites (or the Midianites, depending on which chapter of Genesis you read). Some gypsy-like traders were passing by. (It says parenthetically in the Bible: "They [the brothers] intended it for evil, but God intended it for good." The "sale" was consummated (How much is a favorite son worth?), and off to the South they went.

With that kind of parenthetical expression, you should not be surprised to learn that Joseph ended up in the house of the Pharaoh (Or the Potiphar, anyway), and because he was strong and healthy and wise, all of a sudden he became the Number Two man in the country. A foreign country at that. It could not happen here! You have to be a native to run for President.

Well, he was promoted to that position (you recall) because he was expert at interpreting dreams. For two years, Pharaoh had stood by the river every night (in his dream) and saw seven fat cows, followed by seven lean ones. He could not figure out what it meant; and nobody else could either, even his finest wise men. So finally the Chief Baker remembered that Joseph, who at that time was in prison, knew how to interpret dreams. They called Joseph up. He came. They told the dream. He responded: "This is what it means. It means there will be seven good years, years of plenty in the land. Then seven lean, bad years will come. In the good ones you had better save the grain, because with seven bad years, there will not be any grain at all...."

Pharaoh had the sense to listen to Joseph. And Joseph was right. In the good years they filled every barn, and every little shed he could find in all of Egypt. When the famine came, everybody had to go down to Egypt to beg and buy the grain. Everybody, including his father and the ten older brothers, and a younger one, too. (But that is a story for another day. It has a happy ending, too. All the Bible stories have happy endings.) Things were going well for Joseph.

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As it moves along, in Chapter Forty-one we read: "In the years of the feast, the Pharaoh gave him (Joseph) the daughter of

the Priest. Asenath was her name. She was a beautiful girl, and Joseph fell in love with her. (Isn't it funny, that love, even in the stern Old Testament, keeps jumping boundaries! You and I want to set boundaries: "You are Jew, you are Christian. You are Catholic, you are Protestant. You are black, you are white. You are male, you are female. You are young, you are old. You are labor, you are management. You're a Confederate, I'm a Yankee. We keep setting boundaries and building fences, and love keeps jumping over.) Joseph now have everything....

He was something! For one thing, he was rich. He was famous. He had power. He was young, just thirty years old. Glory! And, it says in a curious little verse, he was good-looking and handsome! (Anybody want to apply for the part of Joseph in the next play we do?) He was young, strong, good-looking, wealthy and successful, had a gorgeous wife and two wonderful children... what more could a man want?

When the first son was born, Joseph decided to name his first son "Manassesh", which has a long and lovely etymology. (No one mentioned what his wife felt.) In that day, fathers named their children, and they often chose names which conveyed what they felt at that time; like Hosea, and many, many others. The name Manassesh means "God has made me forget my troubles". (Did you hear that?) Even though he had had a lot of troubles, God made him forget them. Like birds in a tree, they were off (Clap!) and gone away. He

had forgotten the past.

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Now, some of you out there are thinking: But wait a minute, Dr. Cromie, you don't always want me to forget the past, do you? There are times when the past is precious, even sacred. I live with a budding genealogist-wife at my house. She did not like this topic. She said what it really should say is, "Remember The Past". (By the way, I descend all the way back to Richard De Crombie, who was a Crusader in the Twelfth Century. Can you imagine that? I bet he was a beaut! The record does not say.) And, she said, "What you really should tell those people is that they should remember the past!" I said, "That is true, too". And, I have been reading Herbert Muller's wise and wonderful book entitled The Uses Of The Past; deep and scholarly, but marvelous! He says you have to know and understand the past in order to understand the present, to the end that we can grow in the future.

Others work in the past. Archeologists by the thousands dig up the literal past, all those little pottery things they find. (By the way, I read the other day that an Archeologist [women, listen!] is the best kind of husband to have... because, the older you get, the more he is going to love you! Ha, ha, ha! So, next time, when he gives you a hard time, just tell him, "Oh, you old Archeologist, hush.")

Elsewhere in the bible, it keeps saying,

"How can you ever forget what God has done for you?" In my family, how could I ever forget my father... or you, your mother... or your husband? You just cannot.

Solzhenitsyn quotes, in the Gulag Archipelago, a very interesting comment on the past. When he came out of the prison, the Gulag Archipelago, after ten years of being unjustly locked up (just like Joseph), he said, "Everybody in Russia kept telling me: 'Oh, Alexander, forget about it. So you were in prison for ten years, but you have lots of life left. Just forget about it! The past is past!'"

He responded, "Well, I guess that is right." But then he quoted an old saying from Churchill: "If you dwell too long on the past, it is like you have lost an eye. But if you forget the past, you have lost both eyes." If you dwell too long on the past, it is like seeing with one eye, but if you forget the past, he said it is like being blind! He who forgets the past is condemned to repeat it. Anatoly Scharansky, who just got out of Russia recently, said, "I will never forget those who are left behind!"

You and I can understand it. There are plenty of times when you want to remember the past... but that is for another day. We need a little sermon too, on How To Forget The Past.

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Two Biblical scenes lead the way as

Biblical stories and scenes should always lead the way in the Christian pulpit. We will divide the topic into those separate areas. The first has to do with Joseph. Now watch it: Joseph had to forget the past because: (I.) Others had wronged him. The second scene is from St. Paul in the Book of Philippians, where he says: "Forgetting what lies behind, I press on to what lies ahead, to the high calling of Christ Jesus, my Lord." St. Paul is telling you that (II.) He had lots of things to forget. He had done a lot of dumb things in his life which he regretted. The one who had to forgive himself was Paul. I don't know about you, but I often think that it is far more difficult to forgive yourself than to forgive other people. There in the middle of the night, when your thoughts won't let you sleep, what do you think about? Not so much what other people have done to you, but what you have done and allowed to happen to yourself.

Two areas, right? First is Joseph: How to forgive others who have wronged you. We could manage an extended series of long-liners, two-liners, twenty-liners, all through the Bible. "Vengeance is Mine... I will repay", says the Lord. You carry a grudge around and it is like carrying around a great big old sack of potatoes. You refuse to drop it down, and the burden is yours. You refuse to release it and you put yourself in a cage with it. There are grudges held in marriage, in friendships, in business, everywhere.

When I left Southminster Church in Pittsburgh, there was a woman who, on the day I left, came to the door and said, "Dr. Cromie, I want to apologize to you." I said, "Oh?" She said, "Yes, I have been angry with you for seven years." I did not even know it. Here she was, angry with her own minister for seven years, and he did not know, or care, because he was not aware that she was angry! She carried the burden around, right?

Would you care to know what the reason was? I later asked her, when we became "on speaking terms" again. She said, "The problem is, you never knew my name!" Oh, dear... I mean, dear Gussie, a pastor can preach his heart out, teach the Bible, call on everybody in the parish, but "if you don't know my name, you ain't worth a farthing!"

(By the way, will you tell me your name at the door this morning when you leave? If I know your name, I will call you by it. If I don't, I will probably call you "Honey". And if I call you "Honey", you will know I do not know your name! If I say "Honey", you say: "I'm June". That is the girls. The guys, I call "Buddy". If I call you "Buddy", you can be sure I do not know your name!) You know, I still cannot remember the first name of the woman up there who was mad at me for seven years. I hope she is not here this morning!

In the humor, did you get it? There she was, holding a big old grudge, and blaming me, because of something so incidental.

It never hurt me at all. It hurt her.  
(I do feel badly about that.)

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I do not know if you have read Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon Days. There is a beautiful story which he tells there of the man who came back to Lake Wobegon. Lake Wobegon is a little village in Minnesota. (It really is not there, it is a mythical village, but pretend it is there.) The man came back to Lake Wobegon to tell everybody how terrible it was to grow up there. Especially, he is bothered by the memory of the way his parents taught him and reared him.

Like Martin Luther (he was a Lutheran), the man was going to rap ninety-five theses on the door of the church. In 1517, in Wittenberg, when Luther rapped his ninety-five theses on the door of the church, the Reformation began. Luther had a lot of nerve (he risked his life), banging that list of complaints against the Roman Catholic Church on the old door.... Well, this guy was going to do it. Only these were not charges against the Catholic Church, these were charges against his parents. He was saying how his parents had ill-equipped him to live in the world.

I read in the New York Times about a man who filed a suit for a million dollars against his mother and father, because he said they had twisted him up so much he could not make a living. My goodness! The judge did that one right, he threw it

out of court. He never even heard it.

But this man never heard about the guy who had the case thrown out of court, so he started saying: "These are the Charges" (I won't read all ninety-five of them): "You taught me the fear of becoming lost, so now I cannot enjoy adventures... You taught me to fear strangers, now I cannot enjoy meeting people... You drilled me that a good night's sleep is better than anything, now I feel guilty when I go out... You taught me to worry how I look, now everywhere I go, I am afraid people are looking at me... You taught me when I am a guest, to be quiet, now I cannot talk in company... You taught me to honor work and never to cheat the boss, now I am a workaholic... You taught me to worry about you, and now I cannot go to sleep at night without worrying about my parents... You taught me to be fastidious and have a clean house, and now I fight with my wife every time the place is not clean...."

He went on, and on, and on. He was going to prove to his parents that they were the reason his life had not turned out well. He was saying, "It is your fault, not mine!"

The unnamed man, whose parents used to live at the corner of Branch and Taft, went up to the Lutheran Church to nail his ninety-five complaints on the door, and there he discovered a childrens' Halloween party in progress. He did not want to upset them, and he remembered that his mother and father had taught him

never to spoil church property, so he went back home. He never got to nail his theses to the door. (Did you get it?) He was trying to blame somebody else, rather than himself.

(By the way, I am going to get back to our sermon sometime, but meanwhile... did you ever hear the story of the parish priest at St. Clements, who, in a brief homily on the perfection of Jesus Christ, asked the congregation: "If there is anyone present who feels that he or she is perfect, would you raise your hand?" "Are there any perfect people here?" He asked again? Nobody dared raise their hand. He said, "Are you sure?" Finally, one little fellow in the back row raised his hand. Meekly at first, then boldly. The Priest said, "Stand up, Sir. Do you mean to tell me you are a perfect man?" "No, Sir... I am raising my hand in honor of my dear wife's first husband!")

There was only one perfect man: Jesus Christ. When other people wrong you, and you do not forgive them, you are the one who must carry the burden.

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II. We have to move along. Forgiving others is first, but how to forgive yourself? Hmm? I want to speak to those of you who are middle-aged or older, for a minute. We will come back to the younger ones. I have found that the older you get, the more you begin to worry about the things you did not do. (I remember the day my father told me

that. He was nearing sixty. He said, "You know, Richard, I never worried about anything until I got older, and now I keep wishing I would have done this better, or that better. I worry about all the things I did and did not do as a parent."

Don Polson has a book, Be More Than You Are, where he writes about the day his son got married. (That is a big time in your life, when a parent has to say goodbye to a child.) Polson wrote: "I went back to Chip's room that night and I started to cry. I thought, 'Oh dear, he is not going to come home anymore... his mother and I will never be first in his life again.'" "Then," he confessed, "I wept." But then, all of a sudden, the Spirit of God spoke to him: "Don, do you have any regrets?" He answered, "No, I don't have any regrets." The Inner Voice said: "Well, then let the boy go. She can take care of him!" Right? Don said that he did. He could let him go because he had no regrets.

But, I know a lot of people who do have regrets, who carry a lot of guilt... a lot of burden worrying what kind of parents they were. Their children help to feed that guilt. Our society helps to feed it, too. Pastors help to feed it. Everybody helps to feed it, except the loving presence of God in Jesus Christ. He carries it away. So, maybe you were not a perfect parent. Well, your children were not/are not perfect children... and if they do not turn out all right, don't

blame yourself. Where you were right, rejoice; where wrong, let it go. You must forgive yourself for the things you did and did not do.

A man told me one day (I am speaking to the younger ones here): "If I had only known... I would not have worked so hard, I would not have gone away so often, I would not have played so much golf, and tennis, etc., etc., and I would have taken care of my children with a little more gusto... and with grace. But I didn't know. Well, maybe he did not. But I am telling you now: You do know! That can never be your excuse again. You cannot back it up and do it again, but you can turn it around in the future.

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It happens at death, too. There are people who, when a loved one dies, feel guilty and wish they could go back and re-live it. They cannot ever let the dead one go. They want to keep holding on, because they never got it right. They keep saying: "If only I could have done this; or if I only had done that; or if I had been better here; or if...." You cannot bring them back. Even God will not give you that privilege. (Are you with me?) When you have done things yourself, the worst thing you can do is turn against you. You have enough problems in the world without turning against yourself. You have to let it go.

So maybe you are sitting there saying, "Yes, this is right. But how do I do it?"

How can I keep that "Inner Child of the Past", as Misseldine called it, from plaguing me? How can I get my regrets out of the way, and get them to fly away, like birds in a tree which flee at the sound of a clap!

Well, were you listening to the Scripture from Joseph? It does not say that Joseph was so bright and brilliant; or that he had such great insight that he was able to forgive his brothers, and let go of the past. He could not. You cannot. Just like anyone in Alcoholics Anonymous will tell you, the first rule is: You cannot handle it by yourself, so quit pretending that you can. Alcohol can be too much for you, to be sure, but so can the failure to forgive yourself. If you have those burdens on your shoulders, holding you down, holding you back, you can release them. If you do not, you will live forever in the little cages with them.

You can turn to Joseph, or you can turn to Jesus Christ. Joseph said, "I turned it over to God, and He made me forget. I did not have any choice anymore. "Lord, you carry it now, because it is too heavy for me." And the wonderful thing about it is that He did.

Jesus said, "Forgive them." He also says to forgive you. When Christ was hanging on the cross, your sins and mine were being swallowed up... **Forgiven.** We only need to accept it, and let Him wrap the arms of love around us. For now, and evermore. Amen.