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this way forward

FINDING PEACE...WITH THE PAST...THROUGH FORGIVENESS

Romans 5:1-5

September 9, 2018

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...When you were nine and you let your five-year-old brother's hand go and he ran into the street and was killed... How do you find peace? ...

...When you squandered all your family's money gambling... How do you find peace?...

...When your spouse cheated on you and never paid child support... How do you find peace?...

...When the last time you saw your mother alive and you said horrible things that cannot be unsaid... How do you find peace?...

Traumatic events, that cannot be fixed or undone, can plague us for as long as we live out our days. Too often our strategy is to ignore it, hoping we can forget that it ever happened or pretend that it has no power over us.

But, as Katherine Porter said, "The past is never where you think you left it." What she meant was the past is with you right now; its memories; its impacts.

And, in unexpected moments, the past leaps into the present, at times overwhelming us with grief, regret, and pain. As Southern Gothic novelist Cormac McCarthy observed, "Scars have the strange power to remind us that our past is real." In fact, I have a scar on my hip from a surgery when I was nine years old. Normally, I don't even remember it's there. But, occasionally, I feel a sharp pain and suddenly it all comes back... an extremely sharp pain in my hip and my mother frantically calling an ambulance and six months of recovery.

So, unless we deal properly with the past, we will never truly have peace in the present.

Scripture understands the power of the past to erode our being and our community. In fact, for King David, his past sins ate away at his body. Remember he murdered his lover's husband.

In Psalm 32 he wrote,

*While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.*

*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*

Scripture teaches us that peace with the past begins with restoring your relationship with God. Which means repentance that leads to forgiveness.

So, think back to the list at the beginning of this sermon. Consider those parts of your past that still haunt you in the present. Perhaps a part of you has simply accepted that the pain will always be with you.

But if we turn to scripture and trust its words, like Rick Warren we will realize that, "We are products of our past, but we don't have to be prisoners of it."

King David found truth in this, he took the risk and so found peace. He wrote,

Happy are those whose transgressions are forgiven!

In his silence he found grief and pain; in his body, in his mind, in his soul. But when he found the courage to speak he found happiness and so he wrote,

*Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;*

*I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord',
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.*

As long as we keep quiet about our sins, they will haunt us in ways we cannot imagine. But, as 1 John tells us,

*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive
ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess
our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us
our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

Paul knew better than most what it is to need forgiveness. He persecuted and murdered his own people. But, he found God's cleansing love and so

he found peace; the peace which he described as passing all understanding.

We can't understand it because it does not compute with our accounts. Our natural weak selves keep an accounting of those who have wronged us and what the proportional need for recompense is. And thus, we don't find peace, because some things have no price. But God forgave something we could never repay, which is, in fact, beyond our comprehension.

Paul found peace though he was a wretch: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

This is the foundation of all forgiveness – that of our Lord risen from the grave. The empty cross, which God emptied of wrath, emptied of revenge, emptied of an accounting.

After receiving forgiveness, we then need to go about giving it. Peace with the past is not just about being forgiven, but also about being forgiving.

Pulitzer Prize winner Wallace Stegner wrote, "Be proud of every scar on your heart, each one holds a lifetime's worth of lessons." Those scars reminded us that we have survived and endured.

Perhaps no one used their scars to greater effect than Joseph of the Old Testament. He was his father's favorite. He was a show off. Life was all about him. But his brothers despised him. Despised him enough to sell him into slavery. It led to years of hardship and horror for Joseph. But years later, he had risen to power and he used it to forgive.

Remember last week we discovered that Biblical peace is not about the absence of conflict; it is not about stepping away, but coming together in a new and powerful way.

It was only through forgiving his brothers that Joseph was able to make peace with his past, which in turn, led to a profoundly beautiful reunion with them.

That was the irenic moment, the moment of peace, of tying him together to his brothers; a

moment that perhaps none of them thought would ever be possible again.

If he never forgave them, he would never have his brothers anymore; never have that relationship, that connection; and that would have meant a lifetime of isolation.

Many of us have a hard time forgiving family. There is a moment of disbelief for most when they discover their parents are people too and that they are not perfect.

As you grow into an adult at first their 'peopleness' is a shock. But, if you don't come to peace about it, about how their sins and weaknesses were visited upon you, and shattered your image of your younger days, you will not know peace; you will not know a tying together of all who you are, both the good and the bad.

Which leads us to the last part of forgiveness.

There is one more person to forgive. Once we have received God's forgiveness, and forgiven others sometimes the hardest one to forgive is yourself.

And it is not just forgiveness but acceptance as well. Accepting your own imperfections and your own weakness.

For a long time, the apostle Paul struggled in his weakness. It caused him agony. But in receiving God's forgiveness, he realized that even his weaknesses were meant to draw him to God. Paul heard the Lord say, "My grace is sufficient for you, for **My strength is made perfect in weakness.**"

This is a tying together and acceptance of your imperfections and sins – those of your own making and the ones your parents visited upon you – claiming them all while not allowing them to claim you. It is coming to peace with all that you are...the good and the bad.

In this way, our weaknesses become a vehicle to discover the full majesty, power, and glory of God. If Paul never made peace with himself, he

never truly could have appreciated the fullness of God's love.

If we can forgive ourselves and others who wronged us, suddenly the past which once haunted us becomes something that shapes us into stronger, more loving, more peaceful people. This is the power of forgiveness; the power of accepting all of who we are.

Remember that Joseph was his father's favorite and something of a brat, flaunting that fancy coat in front of his brothers.

But after years of hardship and heartache, he became something new. When he was able to say to them, "You meant it for evil, but the Lord meant it for good." It was clear he had made peace with their sins. It was also clear that he had moved past his own weaknesses.

It had made Joseph a more loving and humble person because he was at peace with God; he was at peace with his family; and finally, he was a peace with himself. Amen.