

Victory of the Lamb

October 20, 2019

Sermon series: Start with Jesus

Sermon theme: when there's pain... forgive

Sermon text: Luke 23:33-43

The most debilitating wounds are not physical. With time most physical wounds heal. The most debilitating wounds are emotional, even spiritual. No matter how much time passes, emotional and spiritual wounds don't seem to go away on their own. They have the power to keep inflicting pain.

Consider the story of Louis Zamperini. His story got worldwide attention because of Laura Hillenbrand's best-selling book *Unbroken*. She tells the true story of how Louis Zamperini raced in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Then he enlisted in the military during WWII and flew a fighter plane in the Pacific. His plane was shot down. Zamperini and two others survived the crash. Zamperini and one other soldier survived 47 days on a life-raft, living off rainwater, fish, and birds as they battled starvation, shark attacks, and even shots from a Japanese fighter plane. He was picked up by a Japanese boat and put in a prisoner camp. For two years he was tortured daily by a sadistic leader named Watanabe, also known as "The Bird".

Somehow he survived all this physical pain and suffering and torture and it he remained *unbroken*. The story is so remarkable that Angelina Jolie produced a movie about 5 years ago also called *Unbroken*. But Jolie's movie only tells the first half of the story. Yes, Zamperini was able to endure all this physical suffering. Yes, his physical wounds healed, and he returned home. And yet, he was still not well. You see, for Zamperini, the most debilitating wounds were not physical, but emotional, even spiritual.

Zamperini might have looked fine on the outside, but inside he was battling the demons of hatred and fear towards his torturer. Every night he was haunted by memories that he just couldn't shake. He tried to cover his pain with alcohol, but of course, this didn't work. It just made him angrier and even violent towards his wife and everyone else who carried about him.

All of us carry around emotional, even spiritual wounds at some level. Maybe our story isn't as extreme as Zamperini's but it is just a real. The bruises and the physical pain from our past might be gone, but our emotional and spiritual pain remains.

Maybe you were physically or sexually abused. Maybe you were abandoned by a friend. Maybe someone attacked your reputation at work or online. I don't know what pain you have suffered. But I know this. Like R.E.M. sang "Everybody hurts".

Now we know what to do with physical pain. If time won't heal it, we go to a doctor. We might even know what to do with emotional pain. We need to go see a professional therapist. But what about our spiritual pain of hatred and fear and shame? And so today I want to answer the question: **How can we heal our heart?**

We are going to answer that question as we finish our sermon series: **Start with Jesus**. In this series we have been challenging some of the assumptions and misconceptions that some might have of Christianity. So far we have challenged the assumptions that Christianity is about power or politics. We

have challenged the assumption that Christianity is about looking down on others. To respond to those challenges we have been going back to the founder of Christianity. We have started with Jesus.

And today we want to challenge one more assumption. We might assume that Christianity can't really heal my heart. We might assume that this book and this church doesn't really have any power to heal. You might assume that Christianity is out of touch and out of date and won't be able to speak to the current spiritual pain that you are enduring.

But let's start with Jesus. Let's go back to the founder of our faith. Let's see what he could do to heal our hearts.

For much of this series we have been going to the teachings of Jesus. We have been looking at his radical words that seem to blow up our assumptions of Christianity. But today I want to go to the actions of Jesus. I want to go to the place that Jesus suffered and see how he dealt with physical, emotional, even spiritual suffering.

Let's read from Luke 23:33 **When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.** I'm not sure how much you know about Jesus' death. But on the day that Jesus was killed, he was brutally tortured. He was stripped of his clothes, clubbed with rods, and whipped with a leather strap that was coated in metal shards. And the Biblical writers describe this torture in quite a bit of detail. But when the writers talk about Jesus' crucifixion, they don't give any detail. They all just say, "he was crucified." Crucifixion was such a painful way to die it needed no description. The pain was so bad that the Romans invented a new word to describe it: "excruciating."

But as we have said from the beginning the worst kind of pain is not just physical, it is emotional even spiritual. You see as Jesus was being crucified he was also being mocked and ridiculed by everyone around him.

Luke writes, **The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."** (Luke 23:35)

The people that Jesus served and healed were sneering at him. The religious rulers, the ones that were supposed to be God's representatives, ridiculed him.

Luke continues, **The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."** (Luke 23:36-37) The soldiers, who had their way with him, challenged him to prove he was a king. If he was really a king then he should be able to save himself, they said.

Even one of the criminals next to Jesus cursed him, **"Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"** (Luke 23:39) Not even someone who suffered the same sentence had pity on him.

But the worse spiritual suffering is mentioned in Matthew 27 when Jesus cries out **My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?** (Matthew 27:46) Jesus felt completely abandoned, not just from the religious leaders, not just from friends and family, but from God himself. He experienced the most excruciating spiritual suffering possible: the feeling of the absence of God.

Do you see why we need to start with Jesus when we are enduring emotional and spiritual suffering? We need to start with Jesus because Jesus suffered too. If you have ever been bullied, start with Jesus, he was bullied too. If you have ever been abused, start with Jesus, he was abused too. If you have ever been ridiculed, start with Jesus, he was ridiculed too. If you have ever felt the pain of complete abandonment, start with Jesus, he was abandoned by everyone. If you have ever felt that even God no longer heard your prayers, start with Jesus, he felt abandoned by God.

So how did Jesus respond to his internal spiritual suffering? Well, normally when humans suffer, they respond with hatred and fear. That's what Louis Zamperini did. But Jesus was not going to respond that way. He was not going to be overwhelmed by evil. He broke the chains of hatred with these words, **"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)** Jesus forgave his enemies.

This is really startling. *Why* would Jesus forgive the very people who are causing him so much pain?

Jesus forgave his enemies because hatred is self-destructive. Nelson Mandela once said, **"Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies."** Hatred, resentment, unforgiveness does help bringing your enemy to justice and repentance. And it does nothing to heal your own heart.

That's what Zamperini discovered. Although he was back in the States, far from Wantanabe "The Bird", his torture, his perpetrator still had control of his thoughts. He wanted his enemy to feel the pain that he felt. He wanted his enemy to be destroyed. But all he was doing was drinking the poison of resentment and hatred.

We all know this at some level. The hatred in our hearts is not destroying our enemies. It's destroying us.

So start with Jesus. Jesus forgave his enemies because he did not want to destroy his own soul. He did not want to be overcome with evil. When we start with Jesus we learn that: **1. Holding on to hatred is self-destructive.** It's poison to your soul.

Jesus would not hold on to that hatred. He was not going to be destroyed by unforgiveness. He said, "Father forgive them." But what does it really mean to "forgive"? Is Jesus really saying what his enemies had done was ok? Was Jesus just saying, "Forgive and forget and move on"?

No, forgiveness does not excuse sin. In fact, the word "forgive" that Jesus used means "to let go" or "forgive a debt". So maybe we can think of it this way. If you were running a business and a client owed you a large sum of money, but they were not going to pay it. Then you have a choice. You could eat the debt yourself. You could absorb the debt. Or you could spend a great deal of time hassling with this client, knowing full-well that he is not going to pay it back. Or you could hand the debt over to someone else, to a debt collecting agency. Then it would be off your books and off your brain and someone else would have to deal with it.

That's what forgiveness really is. Jesus gave the debt to the Father. The Father would judge these people. Jesus let it go and gave it to God. He took their debt off his books.

Back to the illustration of the business. Now in business if somebody still owed you money and has proved themselves to not be trustworthy. They are unwilling to change and do the right thing, are you

obligated to do business with them anymore? Would it even be wise to do business with them anymore? No.

And that's how Jesus responded to his enemies. He was not going to hold on to their sin. He was not going to be filled with hatred and resentment. But neither was he going to do business with these men anymore. After Jesus' resurrection, he didn't go hang out with the religious leaders, or the Roman soldiers, or the crowds of people that ridiculed him. He forgave them, but those who remained unrepentant he stayed away from them. He would not be reconciled to those who remained in their sin.

But there was one who acknowledged his sin and repented. There was a thief next to Jesus who said, "I am being judge justly. I'm getting what my deeds deserve, but Jesus has done nothing wrong." He repented of his sin.

And Jesus did reconcile with him. Jesus was at peace with that man. Jesus said to him, **"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."** (Luke 23:43)

We want to heal our hearts. We don't want to live in constant emotional and spiritual pain day in and day out. We want to know what forgiveness really is. Start with Jesus. Jesus teaches us what forgiveness really is.

2. Forgiveness means to give your enemy's debt to God. It means that you no longer need to hold the bill for someone else's sin. You can give it to God.

Now you might be thinking. "Ok pastor, that is a helpful distinction. Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting. And it doesn't mean approving of what somebody did. And it doesn't mean I need to reconcile with the person. Forgiveness is giving it to God. It is giving the debt to God. It is letting God be the judge. But still, how do you get the strength to do that?"

Great question. This is where we can learn from Zamperini's story. Angelina Jolie's movie only told the first half of the book. She only explain how Zamperini overcame physical suffering. But the rest of the book talks about how Zamperini overcame spiritual wounds. In fact, there is another movie that came out a few years ago that tells the second half of his story. It's also called *Unbroken* but it has the tagline *The Path to Redemption*.

That movie describes how, in 1949, when Zamperini was at his lowest, when he was drowning in alcohol, mean to his wife, and unemployable, the famous evangelist, Billy Graham came in to town. Zamperini's wife tried to get him to go, but he refused. Finally, after a few nights, Zamperini went along. He heard Graham preach the message of Jesus. He heard that he had been forgiven of all his sin. He received the grace of God. And the hatred in his heart was replaced with love.

The love of Jesus was so powerful that Louis was moved to go to Japan and forgive his captives. His archenemy, The Bird, didn't show up, so Louis wrote him this letter

To Mutsuhiro Watanabe,

As a result of my prisoner war experience under your unwarranted and unreasonable punishment, my post-war life became a nightmare. It was not so much due to the pain and suffering as it was the tension of stress and humiliation that caused me to hate with a vengeance.

Under your discipline, my rights, not only as a prisoner of war but also as a human being, were stripped from me. It was a struggle to maintain enough dignity and hope to live until the war's end.

The post-war nightmares caused my life to crumble, but thanks to a confrontation with God through the evangelist Billy Graham, I committed my life to Christ. Love has replaced the hate I had for you. Christ said, "Forgive your enemies and pray for them."

As you probably know, I returned to Japan in 1952 and was graciously allowed to address all the Japanese war criminals at Sugamo Prison... I asked then about you, and was told that you probably had committed Hara Kiri, which I was sad to hear. At that moment, like the others, I also forgave you and now would hope that you would also become a Christian.

Louis Zamperini

Now it's your turn. I'm not Billy Graham, but I want you to hear the same good news that Zamperini heard. Jesus is your Savior. When Jesus said, "Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing" he was thinking of you. He was forgiving you all your sins. All the times that you have been filled with hatred. And all the things that your hatred has led you to do. Jesus died and rose for those sins.

Start with Jesus. Start by seeing what Zamperini saw, that God loves you, that God has forgiven you debt.

Then I pray that you will respond like the thief on the cross, even like Zamperini, that you would say, "Jesus, I deserve punishment, but remember me as you bring your kingdom."

As you and I experience God's love for use, I pray that you begin the process of forgiving you enemies. That you let it go and give it to God. Here is our final take-home point:

3. Start with Jesus by forgiving your enemies.

This is not going to be easy. This is going to take help, and encouragement and time. But over time by the power of God's Spirit you can forgive the sins of your enemies just as God in Christ forgave you.

Louis Zamperini died in 2014. But before he died he said these words in an interview,

"I think the hardest thing in life is to forgive. Hate is self-destructive. If you hate somebody, you're not hurting the person you hate, you're hurting yourself. It's a healing, actually, it's a real healing...forgiveness."

Forgiveness is the hardest thing in life to do. That is a powerful statement. Zamperini survived a plane crash, 47 days in the open sea, battling shark attacks and starvation, and enduring two years of torture in a prisoner camp. Yet, he says, forgiveness is the hardest thing he's ever done. It's probably the hardest thing you will ever do. That's why you need to start with Jesus. You need his love. You need his power. You need his forgiveness. Then you can begin the process of forgiving others as he has forgiven you. And through that process of you will begin to find healing for your heart. Amen.