

Sermon: October 21, 2018: Looking back to move ahead

Well good morning again! Today, we are going to continue in our Spiritual Health sermon series, through which we are hoping that we can both individually and corporately take some distinct steps toward great spiritual health. Just to bring us all up to speed on what we talked about last week, we talked about the need to regularly examine the condition of our hearts before God, ensuring that we are not falling prey to deception or operating out of a selfishly formulated false self. We require courage to unearth the deception residing in our hearts, boldness to seek our trusted companions who will reveal truth to us in love, and bravery to re-engage in the life of the church authentically and honestly. As we do this together, it is my firm conviction that we will inch toward spiritual health, eventually experiencing spiritual growth like never before. Over the next few weeks, we are going to examine some practices and concepts that will help us inch towards spiritual health, perhaps confronting the false beliefs about spiritual growth that we sometimes ascribe to. With all that being said, today we are going to examine the concept that often we must look back if we desire to move ahead. Let me set the tone with a quick story ...

Some of you will know this, but I played a fair bit of hockey when I was younger. This meant that I heard a lot of coaching advice over the years - some of which was helpful, some of which was borderline ridiculous. Sometimes it was difficult to discern which was which! Anyhow, when I was 15, I was transitioned in position from forward to defense, which meant learning a whole lot of new strategies and techniques. Now, I understand that not all of you are hockey aficionados, so I'll have to do a touch of explaining if my point is going to make sense. Often in a hockey game, a defenseman will have to race an opposing forward to the puck located on the end boards behind one's own net. This can lead to some very exciting moments in a hockey game and seems like an easy play when you see it played out on television. In reality, it requires quite a bit of thought and strategy. In the first few games I played on defense, I found that I was regularly beaten to the puck, even though I was quite a quick skater, faster than many of the forwards I was trying to outrace. I couldn't quite figure out what was going on until my coach pulled me aside and passed along an important piece of advice. It was short and sweet and went like this: son, never look over your shoulder. You see, when I was tracking back to get the puck, I had been repeatedly looking back over my shoulder to check on the positioning of the opposing skater. This caused me to slow up a bit, giving him the advantage over me. Applying my coach's advice, I learned that if I just focussed on the puck and resisted the urge to look over my shoulder, I made it to the puck first 9 times out of 10. "Never look over your shoulder" was great advice on the rink, but you know what? ... I began to hear the same advice in an entirely different environment, too.

Maybe it was simply due to my interaction in the world of youth ministry – first as a youth myself, then as a youth leader – but on multiple occasions and from a variety of sources, I heard the same advice, “never look over your shoulder”. Most often this sentiment was connected scripturally with 2 Corinthians 5:17, which reads “**therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here**”. As I think about how this passage was usually presented, it often came accompanied by the words “forget your past”. In fact, often closely following this passage from 2 Corinthians came another passage from Philippians 3:13-14, which reads “**but one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus**” (Philippians 3:13-14). The pastors, teachers and speakers I heard instruct on this topic usually sought to help us understand that by placing our faith in Jesus, we could put to death our past and the sinful behaviour that resides there and move ahead to new life in Jesus Christ. We could move ahead in Christ without ever having to look over our shoulder again at what life had been like before Jesus. But there was an undertone to the teaching that was concerning. It equated a failure to forget the past with a failure of faith in Jesus Christ. If the old had truly gone and yet I could not “forget that which is behind”, it meant my faith was weak and my salvation questionable. This undertone to the teaching led me to a place in my life where I felt thoroughly defeated because I interpreted my struggles with my past as spiritual weakness and failure.

While there is incredible truth in the fact that by faith in Jesus God does not hold our past sin against us anymore – praise Jesus for that reality, right? – it’s not quite true that our past has zero impact upon our present living, is it? I think that if we were all honest with ourselves right now then we’d be able to admit that there are things in our past that haunt us to this day, even though we fully believe and trust in the saving power of Jesus Christ. Sin creates in us patterns of thought and behaviour that are sometimes very difficult, not only to recognize, but also to break., m

Let me give you a humorous non-spiritual real life marriage example. When Meredith and I were first married, we experienced the infamous Battle of the Fridge 2005. You see, unbeknownst to either of us, we both had patterned ways of understanding where certain items in the fridge were “meant” to go. I’d place items in the fridge and then mysteriously find them relocated the next time I needed said item. I’d also find and relocate items I deemed mis-located in the fridge. It would seem that Meredith experienced the same frustrating thing. Tensions grew until “Fridge-gate” erupted and we had a clear conversation about the mechanics of proper fridge utilization. Be assured that our fridge-related conflict is well in the past, but what I hope you see is that though we had left our single lives in the past and entered into a new life together, patterns of behaviour from our individual pasts negatively impacted our present. It was only in revisiting these past patterns of behaviour – determining the proper place to store coffee cream - and thought that we could effectively move forward, growing in our marriage. We had to “look over our shoulders” to effectively move forward.

I want to powerfully affirm the reality that “if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here”. Christ enables us to live differently, free from the power of sin and death that once ruled over us. But this does not mean that we can simply “forget the past”. Our passage from Philippians 3 was written in a very specific context. When Paul wrote that he was “forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead”, he was speaking of something quite specific. We can understand the context by reading ahead a few verses in Philippians 3:7-10:

“But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.” (Philippians 3:7-10)

Let me ask you an interpretive question: what specifically is Paul actively seeking to forget? He’s seeking to forget whatever gains in righteousness he thought he’d earned through the law. Paul is telling us that he is – and by extension we ought to - forget any past attempts to earn righteousness through legalistic behaviour and rely by faith on the incredible grace and mercy of Jesus. He is not urging us to wholesale “forget our past”. In fact, I’ve learned that the greatest movement toward spiritual health and the strongest gains in terms of spiritual maturity actually happen when we engage our pasts. You see, I am a firm believer that Christ desires us to learn from our pasts – yes, even in those years before we knew Jesus – and he desires that we be freed from any anchors that may exist there. In his book *Emotionally Healthy Church*, author Peter Scazzerro puts it this way:

“In emotionally healthy churches, people understand how their past affects their present ability to love Christ and others. They’ve realized from Scripture and from life that an intricate relationship exists between the kind of person they are today and their past.” (*Emotional Healthy Church*, p. 87)

To root this biblically, I’d like to share with you a passage and then examine an occurrence from the ministry of Jesus that allegorically points us in a similar direction. The passage that I think we ought to seriously consider comes from Hebrews 12:1-2 and reads like this:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

The author to the Hebrews directs us to “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles”. OK, let’s walk through this for a moment ... when we come to faith in Jesus, what happens to our sin? As Psalm 103:12 puts it, “as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us”. What we need to realize is that though our past sin is removed from us from a consequential perspective – we no longer shoulder the penalty for sin – past sin still exists from an influential perspective – it still has the power to influence our present. There is still a need to throw off those things which hinder us and the influence of entangling past sin. This process is what encapsulates the idea of spiritual health and development – a process by which we are less hindered and freer to love Christ and others. But it’s a process ... let’s get to the scriptural example.

In John 11, we encounter an incredible miracle of Jesus ... feel free to turn there in your Bibles, if you like. For context, Jesus had developed a close relationship with two sisters, Mary and Martha, and their brother, Lazarus. While ministering in the Judean wilderness, Jesus received word that Lazarus had fallen ill in the town of Bethany and was on the verge of death. Jesus made his way to Bethany, but arrived four days after Lazarus had died and been placed in a tomb. Deeply grieved at the death of his friend and the sorrow expressed by Mary and Martha, Christ made his way to the tomb, asked that the stone sealing it be rolled away, and then prayed that God would hear His prayer. In John 11:43-44, we read this:

“Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” (John 11:43-44)

Amazingly, Christ had called this man out of death and into new life, but I'd like you to note something about his condition as he emerges from the tomb. In all his Halloween-y glory, Lazarus emerged from the tomb entangled in strips of linen, the remnants of his “grave clothes” if you will. Question for you: how well do you think Lazarus would be able to make his way through life, while still encased in his “mummy wrap”? . These remnants of his life prior to resurrection would only serve to hinder and prevent his experience of resurrected life and so, they needed to be removed. In fact, tightly wrapped around his body, they would stunt any growth and development Lazarus might experience. They'd also hinder any meaningful interaction with others ... imagine trying to sit down for a coffee with a guy who looked like The Mummy. Imagine Lazarus trying to share the good news of what Jesus had done for him tangled in strips of linen, his face hidden behind a cloth. The truth is that Lazarus needed to throw off everything that hindered him and the results of sin that entangled him. This is exactly what Christ encouraged Lazarus to do ... actually, that's not quite true. This is what Jesus instructs the other followers of Jesus to do for Lazarus. Hold that thought for a moment ...

Allegorically, I'd like to suggest to you that the same is true of us as followers of Jesus. We have been gifted incredible new life in Jesus Christ, but often there are patterns of sin so deeply engrained in our practice that they serve as anchors dragging against our spiritual growth and development. Past sin - even generational patterns of sin passed along to us – has the power to completely alter our spiritual development. Shedding these hindrances is not a second salvation, as some might teach it, but is part and parcel of a process of salvation initiated when we come to faith in Jesus. Now, it is possible that God might break such patterns of sin within us immediately upon coming to faith in Jesus, but it is highly likely that some of these patterns will remain to be confronted. This process, which the Apostle Paul outlines in Romans 12:1-2, saying **“do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”**, always requires facing down our past to uproot such patterns. Later in his letter to the Romans, Paul urges us to **“put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light ... clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 13:12,14).**

Take off your “grave clothes” and be clothed in Christ, commands Paul. Often though we try to clothe ourselves with Christ, while still wearing our tattered “grave clothes” and nothing seems to quite fit. Looking back, then, enables us to identify which “grave clothes” still hang from our frames, so that we can then take them off. If we do not remove our “grave clothes” not only will our own growth and development be hindered, but so too will our ability to love people the way Christ calls us to.

In fact, one of the most powerful lesson of my life was that “hurt people, hurt people”. If we do not address past sin in an adequate way, if we seek to bury it, ignore it, or forget it, we will almost inevitably end up hurting someone else. As a youth pastor, I bore witness as a woman emotionally injured her children out of her own hurt precipitated by a divorce. When, out of care and concern, I tried to suggest that some of her actions might be rooted in unresolved issues related to her divorce, her angry response was “my divorce has NO impact on my present life”. The fractured relationships that spiralled out of this circumstance still leave a heaviness in my heart. None of us want our past sins or the brokenness that results from them to impact the relationships we presently have, but unless we look over our shoulder, this is the ensured result.

So what do we do? First, I think we need to pray for an awareness of that which might hinder and the sin might easily entangle, lurking in our pasts. Because our hearts are inherently deceitful, we need God’s help in identifying where sin and brokenness might still find a home in our hearts. One of the key jobs of the Holy Spirit is to convict us of sin, but all too often we can stop up our ears to His voice, rendering His conviction useless. So, in a bold sort of move, we’ve got to open our ears to the voice of the Spirit, earnestly asking Him to bring conviction where necessary. And when we experience His voice of conviction, we ought to repent of such sin and seek to address it in helpful ways that lend to our spiritual growth and development.

But we ought not undertake this on our own; we must involve others in the unravelling of our “grave clothes”. Imagine how difficult it would have been for Lazarus to unwrap himself when Jesus called him from his tomb. Allegorically, it’s just as difficult for us to unravel the entanglement of sin in our lives on our own. We require trusted companions who can not only help us see the sin that might lurk in the dusty corners of our hearts, but also those who will lend a hand in giving a tug on our “grave clothes”. Just as Lazarus’ community was engaged in helping free him from the bondage of death, so too do we need a community that will help free us from the bondage of sin and death, individuals who will stand with us as we look over our shoulder and identify past sin that causes present spiritual stagnation. This is where we hope our H2H groups lead us. My prayer is that, in community, we would take time to look over our shoulder, identifying and addressing and residual of sinful patterns of behaviour and thought that exist there, trusting that as the Apostle Paul wrote “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Let’s pray.