

God Between Me and My Past

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First Baptist Church, Kansas City, MO

August 28, 2016

John 9:1-3,30-34

Does anyone here have a past? Everyone here has a past!! When I was a candidate to become your pastor, members of the search committee called members in several previous congregations, asking: “Does this guy have a past?” And, of course, I do. We all do. But when we ask, “Do you have a past?”, we aren’t asking how long you’ve lived, but, “Does your past cast a shadow upon you today?”

I think it does for everybody, don’t you? We all have a past and yes, things that have happened in our past cast a shadow upon our lives far into the future. We all have unresolved “stuff.” We all have hurts and bruises that won’t easily or quickly heal. We all have broken relationships. Some people have experienced the pain of divorce. And it is challenging to “resolve” divorce so that it no longer hurts. And some people have sour relationships with their parents, or siblings, or children. And the hurts get piled up high. And the accusations go on and on. So, how do you heal hurts like this? How do you make them better? Will the hurts ever go away?

What if a child has been abused or exploited? What if a spouse has been abused? Isn’t the result nearly always the same: the child or spouse blames themselves? It’s my fault. I must have done something to cause it. And guilt is carried for years to come.

Are there things we cannot forgive? Or mistakes we have made that we couldn’t possibly seek forgiveness from those we have wronged? We pray every Sunday, “Forgive us our debts, or sins, as we forgive our debtors, or those who sin against us,” but those are just words. It’s hard, isn’t it? Extremely hard.

Don’t you have unresolved issues and relationships from your past? In premarital counseling, I give couples the Taylor Johnson Temperament Analysis, and one of the personality traits it measures is how much built-up anger and hurt persons carry. And I’m amazed at how many young adults carry around a heavy “backpack” full of unresolved hurt and shame. And this backpack can sabotage a new marriage if the person isn’t aware of it. The person must unload the backpack, usually with the help of a therapist. The problem with unresolved hurt and shame is that it rarely gets expressed at the right moment. Usually, it is messy and it explodes at the wrong person. That’s when we ask, “Why did I over-react like that?” And the answer typically is that something in your current situation triggered your long-held hostility but didn’t cause it. The hurt, guilt or shame from your past makes you a bomb ready to detonate. And innocent people get hurt.

I work in the “people business,” and it’s impossible to not experience hurt around other people. “Church hurt” really hurts, because we are all convinced that church isn’t supposed to hurt. We are all supposed to be loving and gentle at church, right? And yet, if you have been around any

church long, you know there is hurt. I give thanks to God that right now in our congregation there is a spirit of congeniality. But, we don't have to go back all that far in our church's history to find a two-year period when members were yelling at each other in open business meetings and campaigning against each other. It was very hurtful and occasionally people still talk about it.

In the past, I've had two pastoral associates whom I promoted when I began in those two congregations. I did everything possible to empower them, to give them a voice, to give them access to the pulpit, and I treated them with equality and respect. And with those two, when the chips were down, they betrayed my trust. And I still carry the hurt from those experiences. Now, compare that with at least 25 other colleagues I have had down through the years where we have remained deep friends, and we developed healthy working relationships. I've had so many blessed relationships with colleagues down through the years – the kind of blessed relationships I enjoy today with Stephanie and Victor. If that is so, then why does my relationship with those two staff persons from the past still hurt? They are a statistical non-event. 25 to 2! Let it go! But it's so hard.

Have you noticed that hurt has a long life? Hurt won't just go away. Hurt has a way of accompanying you along life's journey. You don't even have to feed it. Hurt can take on a life of its own. It can wake us up on the middle of the night in a cold sweat. It can preoccupy our day dreams.

There's a Buddhist story about two monks who sat beside a river. A woman came along who needed to get to the other side. She approached the monks to carry her across. Because it was forbidden for monks to touch a woman, one of the monks declined even to acknowledge the woman's request. But the other monk agreed to carry her across to the other side. He lifted her up and carried her across. Then he came back and sat down beside his fellow monk. Six hours went by in silence. The monk who had declined to help the woman turned to the other and said, "Was she heavy or light?" The first monk answered him, "You are still carrying her." (p. 133, Common Grace, Tony Robinson)

That is what we do. We still carry our regrets around.

The same can be said of guilt and shame. Shame is caused by an awareness of our wrong-doing. Shame results in a loss of self-dignity and degradation. Shame paralyzes our life. We cannot move. We cannot move on. We are embarrassed; we feel extreme guilt. And we feel stuck in our guilt. And often in our minds we rehearse over and over the mistakes we have made, the cover-ups we have attempted, what we should have done to avoid our wrong-doing.

Can't we relate so easily to the Psalmist, who prayed to God, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be purer than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness... Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." Psalm 51:7-11

This is one of my favorite stories in the Gospels, told only in the Gospel of John. Jesus was walking along and he saw a man who had been blind from birth. Before Jesus could interact with the man, his disciples asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" That is an amazing question, isn't it? It was the assumption of Jesus' disciples

that the man's blindness, from birth, was either the result of his own sin, or that of his parents. Now, if he was born blind, how could it be the result of his own sin? He entered the world from his mother's womb. He didn't have a chance to sin as a defenseless baby. But in the ancient world, there was the belief, even among Jews, that sin could be possible in the womb before birth. There is this assumption: the man was born blind: someone's sin is the cause.

Imagine being blind from birth in a society where everyone assumed it was your just punishment for someone's sin—probably your parents. Imagine being the parent of a child born blind. Imagine everyone accusing you, "What sin have you committed? What have you done wrong?" Because you have not repented of your sin, requested God's forgiveness, now your son will be blind throughout his life. Whenever you see him, you see your sin. As an adult, this blind man became a beggar...why? Because he was a sinner, through and through, and the only thing he could do, in his shame, was to beg from others. His disability prevented him from entering the Temple. He was an outcast.

Imagine the shame in parents showing off their baby, who has become a symbol of their sin. His disability is their fault. This child would be raised in shame, the parent's shame, would be his for the rest of his life. Talk about messed-up relationships and a messed-up life.

Jesus set all this shame and guilt aside with a few simple words: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." His being born blind has nothing to do with anyone's sin, and therefore, should not instill guilt or shame in them or anyone else. However, Jesus continued, the man's blindness does offer a wonderful opportunity for God to be revealed. His blindness is no longer the result of shame, but a vehicle through which God can express extreme love.

Having spoken of how God could act through this man's disability, Jesus "spat on the ground and made mud with his saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam'. Then the man went and washed and returned able to see! Look what God had done through him. Jesus turned shame into joy! Jesus turned guilt into liberation! Now, when people looked at this man, they no longer looked down upon him, but now they looked upon him with amazement because he now revealed, in his new-found vision, the Light of the World. He no longer lived in the darkness of shame. He was liberated in love, filled with God's Healing Goodness.

Now the Pharisees got involved because Jesus healed this blind man on the Sabbath, violating their definition of the Law. (14) And when the Pharisees talked with the man, they insulted him, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they hurled insults at him. The Pharisees were reminding this man of the shame that had defined his entire life. But the man would have none of it. He was now free of that shame and he wasn't about to be held down by it again. He responded, "Now this is truly remarkable!... Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." (32-33)

In this wonderful story, we learn that Jesus can free us from shame, free us from guilt, free us from lingering hurt. Indeed, Jesus can use our shame and guilt to reveal God's love. When God enters our lives, we can be free of guilt or shame. In I John (4:18) we read, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment! Fear has to do with guilt! Fear has to do with shame! And whoever fears has not been perfected in love."

There's nothing wrong with some degree of guilt. If we go through life avoiding guilt, we will never be able to face down the inner demons that possess all of us. We tend to live in a society based on blame. I fell on the sidewalk outside your business. It's your fault. You're to blame. You flunked my daughter in second grade. It's your fault. You're to blame. I didn't get my promotion at work. It's your fault. You're to blame.

Guilt, by itself, isn't necessarily bad. Clearly, a little guilt right now on the part of Ryan Lochte would be a good thing. Ryan is an award-winning swimmer, but he got drunk one night in Rio and with his friends fabricated a story that they had been robbed at gunpoint by a man impersonating a police officer. Apparently, little in the story was true and it unfortunately placed a blemish upon hundreds of Olympic athletes who came to Rio in the wholesome spirit of the historic games. These young men should feel guilt, and not pass off their wrong-doing as someone else's fault. Accepted guilt would then allow them to do the things that make amends, that set things right. There is no need for these four athletes to carry embarrassment or shame the rest of their lives. But some profound act of right-doing could set straight the wrong-doing of their lies in Rio. And the entire incident could be left behind.

I'm suspecting today that every person in this room carries deep regret for incidents in their past. If only I had stopped what I was doing on that Thursday afternoon and came to visit grandma. I missed saying goodbye before she died. And now I feel deep regret and guilt. Think about it: what grandmother would want her grandchildren to carry deep regret or guilt? Share your guilt with your family and ask for forgiveness and get over it. Yet, we all carry unresolved regret, and this is the feeding ground for shame to grow.

I had a similar experience last Sunday afternoon. We received a shocking telephone call from Beverley Hoffmeister that her husband, Desmond, died unexpectedly the day before. You might recall that we had Desmond here in our church in 2014 to speak during Black History Month about Nelson Mandela. As soon as we hung up, I immediately felt the pang of regret because Desmond and I hadn't talked, possibly in a year. And I realized then that we would never be able to have those wonderful conversations again. Why hadn't I called him this Spring or Summer? But then I thought, "What good does my regret do? Desmond was like a brother to me and all I will do is spoil the memory of our bond of friendship if I wrap it up in my guilt.

I think in this incident between the man born blind and Jesus, Jesus is saying to him, to his disciples, and to all of us: shame is a lousy way to live! No one should live in shame. No one should live as an outcast. And every situation, no matter how bad, can instead be an opportunity for revealing God's presence. Certainly a heart-felt apology, an effort to make amends, can be an expression of grace and love.

Here's an exercise for you: we repeat the Lord's Prayer every Sunday in worship. The next time you say these words, remember: God's wants to release you from guilt and shame. And here are the words, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." Help us, Lord, to clean up our past, and to move on. Yesterday's regrets need not burden today's possibilities.

Suppose Jesus and his disciples are walking past you this morning. And somehow they are able to see shame or guilt pasted across your face, from your past. And, pointing to you or me, the disciples ask Jesus, "Why is this person so bad?" And Jesus will respond to us, "You aren't a bad person. But you need to be freed from your guilt, released from your shame." And just as he took the blind man's face gently in his hands and pasted mud over his eyes, so will he take us

gently in his hands and release us from the blindness that causes us not to see the heavy backpack we are carrying around. Jesus will say to us, "Be free!"

Jesus knows my heart is broken over the death of my friend Desmond. He sees the pain and grief as he reaches out to touch my face. And he says to me, "Steve, be released from your guilt. Be released from your regret. Be free!"

God comes between me and my past. If I allow it, God's Holy Spirit can liberate me from my shame, from my mistakes, from the pain others have inflicted upon me, or I have brought upon myself.

When God comes between me and my past, or between you and your past, it is a day for great rejoicing! The burden of regret has been lifted! We are forgiven! We can forgive others! And we can move on to live the life that God is setting before us! Amen.