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JUST LET GO OF THE PAST – NOT! Michael B. Beough
Philippians 3:4b-14 September 20, 2009
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In Philippians 3, the Apostle Paul gives us a vivid image of the Christian life. He says, *"Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."*

This morning I want us to understand what he means by "forgetting what lies behind." As you can guess from my sermon title, he does not mean just let go of the past. He doesn't mean ignore the past.

Even if you don't hear it stated specifically, it is easy to get the message in church that we shouldn't let what happened in the past bother us. After all, according to Scripture, we are new creations in Christ Jesus.

But nothing could be further from the truth. Such a disregard for the past is actually a crazy-maker. The ignored past is like having an elephant in the room of the present. It affects everything we do. We may not want to admit it is there, but there it is, big and obtrusive and dangerous. Just imagine what it would be like to have an elephant in a room of your house. Most likely it would cause fear and anxiety. That's how an ignored past affects our spirits. It becomes the source of much depression. It crushes relationships. It sucks up all the oxygen. There is no way to press on toward the goal Paul speaks of in Philippians 3 until we have dealt with this elephant.

Henry Cloud and John Townsend, Christian psychologists, say, "If we don't expose things of the past to the light of God's truth and love, they remain in darkness and are still alive today, creating fruits of darkness in us."

So, in Philippians 3, Paul is not saying let bygones be bygones. Rather he gives us a healthy model of dealing with the past.

First, we must take ownership of our past.

Second, we must recognize and admit the darkness in our past.

Third, we must expose our past to the light of God's truth and love.

Let's look at these three. **The starting point for a healthy emotional and spiritual life is in taking ownership of our past.**

One of the things I like about Paul is that he never hid his past from others. He tells it like it was. In fact, in verses 4b – 6, he admits that he had been proud of what he was. "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the

flesh, I have more." Paul is saying, "This is who I was. This is how I was brought up. This was my experience."

No doubt, Paul could have added a lot of other details about his past. He doesn't tell us anything about his childhood, for example. We don't know who his parents were, except that his mother was a Jew and his father was a Roman. We don't know if they were loving parents or tyrants. We can guess that he grew up in a strict religious home, according to the Law of Moses. His Roman father no doubt left the religious training up to Paul's mother, like so many fathers do today. We don't even know if he had siblings. The point is that Paul never hid his past. As a disciple of Christ, it was important for him to own up to his past and to make it known to others.

There is no getting rid of the elephant until we are able to own it and talk about it, this past that looms over us and often tramples us. So much of who we are and how we relate to others come from this past. What was your community like where you grew up? What was your family like? What was your relationship like with your parents? Do you see your parents in yourself in your relationship with your children or with your spouse? Do you see yourself repeating what you experienced, believing only what you learned to believe? Where do you come from?

One thing I like about our Men's Breakfast once a month is that we tell stories about ourselves. I am sworn to secrecy, but I can tell you that our stories explain a lot about some of the men in our group. We don't get too serious most of the time, but we are taking ownership of our past. We are saying to one another, "This is where I come from."

Inevitably, when we start sharing our story, taking ownership, we begin to realize that not everything in our past was a warm fuzzy. **Disciples of Christ know that a healthy emotional and spiritual life requires recognizing and admitting the darkness in our past.**

In Philippians 3, Paul recognizes and admits the darkness in his past. Why does Paul list details about his life before he came to know Christ? Because in hindsight, he can see that his whole life before knowing Christ had been about achieving righteousness, doing the right thing to please God. In fact, Paul had the characteristics of a man who desperately needed approval, a man driven by the need for approval from authority figures. This drive even led him to becoming a persecutor of the church (verse 6). He was the ultimate good guy, the most deserving of approval.

But to whom was he really trying to prove himself? Perhaps it was his mother. Perhaps his overzealous and deadly nature was a way of pleasing her. "Look, Mom, what a good boy I am, just the way your taught me!"

Or perhaps Paul was trying to please his father. Perhaps his father thought Paul would never amount to anything. Just a silly Jewish boy, a

mamma's boy. So Paul becomes a real man. He proves he can be as manly and violent as any Roman soldier marching down the streets of Judea. "Look, Dad, what a man I am!"

What I am suggesting is that the way we relate to people today, and to God, gets driven by our experiences in previous relationships. We are often driven by the unresolved angers, hurts, and feelings from the past that linger in our souls today. A man lives his whole life trying to prove his worth to a father who never thought he was good enough. A woman lives her whole life trying to prove she is better than her sister. A wife withdraws from intimacy with her husband because she was abused as a girl.

What is it that drives us? What darkness lingers in our souls? Don't let anyone tell you to forget all that past stuff. You know you can't forget it. It never goes away. The key is to recognize and admit it. To talk about it. **We must bring it to the light of God's truth and love where God's grace can wash it clean.**

In telling his story in Philippians 3, Paul reveals the outcome of exposing his past to the light of God's truth and love. In verse 7, he says he regards the darkness in his past as loss because of Christ. Because of Christ, he has been able to face his past, repent of it, and let it go. It no longer drives his decisions and relationships. He calls this newfound freedom resurrection. He wants to know more of Christ and the power of his resurrection.

Let me share three things that Christ empowers us to do with regard to our past.

Christ empowers us to forgive those who have hurt us. Until we are able to forgive, we will never rid ourselves of anger, resentment, and shame. We will live our lives in the shadows of that huge elephant instead of in the light. We have to do the work of grace, as Paul writes in Ephesians 4:32, "Forgiving others as God in Christ has forgiven you." The second half of this phrase is the key. Knowing that Christ forgives us empowers us to forgive others.

Christ empowers us to grieve our losses. Jesus says in Matthew 5, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." I have always thought that Jesus is simply telling us that if something sad happens in our lives, we can be sure that God will come along and comfort us. That is true, but this is a Beatitude. Jesus is being more proactive here. He is telling us to practice mourning, to grieve, as a way of letting go of the past. It is only by mourning the loss that God can open us up to the new life God has planned for us.

Grieving is a conscious process through which we deliberately release our attachment to persons, ideas, feelings, and wishes that we need to

outgrow. Grief is what breaks the umbilical cord of unhealthy attachments. Until these attachments are broken we can never know the resurrection life of which Paul speaks and for which Paul longs above all else. Even if we aim for Christ but stay attached to the past, we will be like Lot's wife, looking back and turning into pillars of salt. Do you feel like a block of salt some days? Just sitting there emotionally and spiritually? Unable to feel, unsure which direction to go, resentful of your past, maybe longing to go back there? Do you feel stuck? Let Christ help you grieve the loss and he will comfort you.

Christ empowers us to confess and repent. Looking into the past will bring to mind the role we played in the darkness of the past. I do not mean that we should take responsibility for all the darkness. If you were abused as a child, you have no responsibility for that. That is not your fault. You must never take the blame.

But we must take responsibility for what legitimately lies at our doorstep. A key to letting go of the past is to ask forgiveness from those we have hurt and to make amends. The reason many people never experience the grace of God is because they have never confessed their darkness to another person. So long as we avoid responsibility, we will fail to know the peace, purpose, and promise that come from the hand of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul does not tell us to forget the past. He tells us to deal with it. And God gives us a way to do that.

You might get tired of hearing me say this, but we cannot deal with the past in a healthy way by ourselves. God knows that and has given us the church as an instrument for helping us deal with the past. It is tempting to think we don't need the church, but we do. Billy Graham's daughter is an evangelist like her famous father. However, because of bad experiences she had as a church member, she refused to tell her crowds that they should get in a church. She did not want to feed new Christians to the lions. Recently, she has changed her tune. She tells the new Christians that they need to find a church. It is nothing less than a conversion experience for her. She says she cannot be the person God intends her to be without the church.

You see, God does not leave us helpless. God gives us one another. God gives us the church where we don't have to pretend. I know you have elephants in your room, and you know I have elephants in my room. But in the church, we try not to shoot each other. Instead we help each other get the elephants out of our rooms. It is a messy process, especially if they have been around for a long time. It takes time and lots of strength and lots of courage to move those elephants. But in the church we are patient. We know God is at work among us, and we so keep pressing "on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."