

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

¹⁶ Because of this decision we don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don't look at him that way anymore. ¹⁷ Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it! ¹⁸ All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other. ¹⁹ God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins. God has given us the task of telling everyone what he is doing. ²⁰ We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them. We're speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; he's already a friend with you. ²¹ How you say? In Christ, God put the wrong on him who never did anything wrong, so we could be put right with God.

I am one of those people who saves items as reminders of special moments and important people in my life. They are symbols of moments and people I **never** want to forget. I collect Harley-Davidson tee-shirts when we go on trips. I collect seashells, and I have a lot of them. Sometimes I will pick up a stone and save that as a memory to a place where I've been and had a meaningful experience. I even have sand and a few small seashells from a beach in California that I collected and display in a small fishbowl, reminding me of the beauty of God that I saw on the west coast of our nation. All of these collections remind me of good times in my life, or recovery from times that were not so good. They remind me of God's presence in my life.

There's nothing wrong with having these little keepsakes. Especially if they remind us of good things that make us happy. They can be a source of encouragement when we later go through challenging times. But sometimes people hold on to things that can have the opposite effect on their well-being. Over time they may damage their physical, mental and/or spiritual health. People might hold on to things, or memories that do more harm than good to their relationships with others, or even more tragically, they might hamper their relationship with God.

Imagine a woman who gets married and, after her wedding day, hires one of those services that preserve wedding dresses. She doesn't know why she's doing it, exactly. It just seems the right thing to do.

The bride gets the dress back a few weeks later, dry-cleaned and carefully sealed in a special box. She places the box in her attic, and there it stays.

She has a daughter, who grows up and begins planning her own wedding. Somehow the mother forgets to mention the wedding dress in the attic.

More years go by. Her daughter has a daughter of her own. One day, this teenage granddaughter is helping her grandmother move some things in the attic, and they come upon the box.

"What's this, Grandma?"

"It's my wedding dress."

"Oh, Grandma," says the girl, "I've seen those pictures from your wedding day, and I think you and I are about the same size. Do you think, when I get married, I could wear your dress?"

"We'll see," says the grandmother. "Oh, look -- here's that old croquet set. I thought we'd lost that!"

More years pass. The granddaughter meets a man and falls in love. At their engagement party, the girl approaches her grandmother and reminds her of their discussion about the dress. This puts the grandmother in a quandary. She feels honored by her granddaughter's request and truly wants her to be happy, but it's not an easy thing to break open the seal on that box.

Returning home, she retrieves it from the attic and has a look at it. Through its clear plastic window, she can glimpse the elegant lace, the faux pearls -- looking as fresh today as they did so many years ago.

It was a fine, expensive dress in its time. What if she lets her granddaughter wear it, and it gets stained or torn? Weddings today are so different. There's the obligatory trip to the beach or the park, for photographs. What if it rains, and the ground is muddy? As for the dancing at the reception -- it's so much wilder than in her time, when waltzes and fox trots were the order of the day. Some clumsy guest steps on the hem, the bride moves in the opposite direction -- why, she can almost hear the sound of 40-year-old fabric tearing!

Once the grandmother breaks the seal on that box and hands the dress over, it will no longer be hers alone. The dress will belong just as much to her granddaughter. Maybe she should just offer to write a check for a new dress.

But then, she pauses. She thinks a little more. What's a wedding dress for, anyway? Is it meant to be sealed up in a box and viewed only through a little plastic window? Or is it meant to be worn, moved in -- and, yes, even torn or stained, if that's what the day brings?

She calls her granddaughter's cell phone. "Yes, my dear. I'd be pleased if you would wear my wedding dress. In fact, I would like nothing better!"

It can be very difficult to let things go sometimes; especially bad memories and the emotions they can stir-up within us, even if we know that letting go would make us feel better. For some of us, those memories remind us of mistakes we made, making it difficult to forgive ourselves. Sometimes, making things worse are the ongoing consequences of our mistakes, continually stirring up regret and shame. Holding on to painful memories when we've been wronged may instill within us fear, lack of trust and anguish. The emotions surrounding the damaging stuff from the past, whether self-inflicted or otherwise, can rob us of our energy and enthusiasm for life. And, as the Apostle Paul tells us, holding on to these things will most certainly paralyze one's faith.

In verse seventeen we read that Paul wrote, "Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start and is created new. The old life is gone; a new life begins." In other words, when we clean house within and allow Jesus to move in, we get an opportunity for a new beginning. As is so often the case in our spiritual walk, it, however, needs to be our choice, we need to want it, and we need to be willing to part with the things that hold us back from finding freedom in Christ.

I've experienced pain in my life. As a child, I was violated by two men. As a pastor I was rejected by congregations who felt a woman should not be a pastor. I've made mistakes. I've experienced losses through death, and because of moving from one congregation or community to another. Many times as I tried to work through the heartache of these things, people would tell me that I need to just let go of the bad stuff from the past. I hated that!

They would say, "Just give it to Jesus." So, I prayed many, many times for Jesus to take away bad memories and the pain associated with them. I prayed many times for God to help me forgive others who inflicted pain in my life; yet the memories continued to hold power over me

and would not go away. I asked for forgiveness for my mistakes, yet I continued to feel shame and regret. I asked for the pain of my losses and brokenness to be taken away, but it remained. After being told repeatedly to, “Just give it to Jesus,” and feeling like I failed to do that time and time again, I began to say, “Alright, tell me how to do that.”

How do we let go of the things that hold us back from being everything God created us to be? How do we let go of the negative feelings and disappointment we may have about ourselves? How do we get rid of all of this stuff that drags us down, and move on? I often times I thought to myself, someone, please tell me, and don’t say, ”just give it to Jesus.”

I am here to testify, it is possible to experience freedom and healing from the burdens, sins and painful memories that weigh us down. The Apostle Paul testifies to the same truth. But it’s not always easy. It does begin with laying all that stuff at the feet of Jesus, maybe not just once, but every time it rears its’ ugly head in your heart and emotions. Don’t expect that doing this is going to always be a hocus-pocus magical solution to what you feel. Feelings, while a gift from God, can betray us and make it difficult to begin anew, feeling free from our burdens.

It’s not always only our own feelings that are the culprits attacking our ability to experience freedom from what was, especially when we have wronged someone. Others remembering and holding on to memories of our wrongs, can wave them in front of us, driving us to that dark place where we feel negativity about ourselves. Paul understood that challenge firsthand.

After Christ’s resurrection, Paul sought out the early Christians, dragging them before the authorities against those who started this new faith, where they suffered, and some died. After Paul’s encounter with the resurrected Christ, and his conversion, Paul became a missionary for spreading the Gospel. Many believers in Christ were unwilling to trust him. Even if Paul understood their feelings, I can’t help but think, it must have been a painful blow to his self-esteem.

Paul not only carried the baggage of his sinfulness of the past, and the inflictions of continued judgement against his new character, but we also read in 2 Corinthians 12:7 that Paul spoke of having a “thorn in the flesh”. We’re not sure what this “thorn in the flesh” was exactly. He never tells us. Some have suggested it was a physical chronic malady. Others believe it refers to the suffering, through imprisonments, ridicule, physical punishments that he endured throughout his ministry, incidents not resulting from sins he committed. Whatever this thorn may have been, it was an unpleasantry he lived with and had to deal with and overcome emotionally, otherwise, he would not had been free to become the person God created him to be.

Our painful memories and losses, our regrets and shame, our experiences of rejection, are all very real. Various feelings arise as we remember, and those feelings are not to be denied. Yet, as the Apostle Paul did, we benefit by making a conscious decision to deny them the power to hold us prisoner to a past we cannot change, and a future free to experience newness of life. We make the conscious decision, but the steps we take following that, we do not take alone. We have Jesus to help us.

It is certainly an ongoing process because feelings do not magically go away. Sometimes, as they arise again, and we spend time with them, they weaken their hold on us. We don’t allow them to sway us from our focus on the choice we made to hold on to Jesus and walk in the newness of life. We, instead, visit with them, pulling out of the box we carefully stored them in, and after acknowledging that they played a role in creating who we are now, we embrace what we learn from them, and put them back on the shelf, and choose to move ahead with God’s plan

for us. We’re never alone when they revisit. Jesus is with us, offering us strength to put them on the shelf after a brief time, and move on from there.

Remember earlier in verse 17 he said, “Look inside, ”what is going on inside you? What thoughts, feelings and memories are inside you? How are they influencing , perhaps controlling you? Don’t hold on to them. God has something better for you. Holding onto them creates a chasm between you and God.

Then in verse 19 of today’s scripture reading, Paul says, “God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins.”

I hear words of caution that reach even into this topic dealing with the inner negative things we hold onto. I hear that when we hold tightly on to regrets, pain, unforgiveness and sin, we are putting all of these emotions and experiences ahead of God, we make them our gods, instead of accepting and welcoming all that God did for us through the death and resurrection of his only Son. We permit all that stuff to influence who we are and what we do or don’t do, instead of allowing the Spirit to fill us and lead us. God has done everything he can possibly do to set us free to live in his joy and peace.

Do not even begin to entertain the thought that I am saying your feelings are wrong, and you are a bad person for having them, that is not what I am saying. I am saying, do not choose to allow them to become your god. Make a conscious decision to journey through them with your focus and trust in God. Pray, dig into God’s word, get out there and use the gifts God has given you, don’t be afraid to venture into avenues unknown using yet to be discovered God-given gifts. No, unwanted feelings may not, and likely will not go away overnight, but each forward step you take in faith, takes you closer to freedom from the power they hold over you.

This is what Paul did throughout his life after allowing Jesus into his life and throughout his ministry and the challenges that arose while fulfilling his call. I can testify that this is what I do. Oh yes, there are days when what is packaged away inside me from the past rears its’ ugly head and can make me feel rather miserable; but when I catch what is happening, I look at it, acknowledge its presence, and take steps to use the energy from it to take steps in positive ways, for Jesus’ purposes through me. I don’t always catch it immediately, but I believe God tries to make me aware of its’ presence, and when I finally see it, I know I need to do something. Paul tells us, God has done everything he can possibly do to get us moving in the right direction. Re we willing to move forward?

From his hospital bed on the eve of open-heart surgery, Pastor Bruce McIver asked his cardiologist, Dr. Dudley Johnson, “Can you fix my heart?”

The physician said, “Sure.” Then he walked away.

Following the twelve-hour surgery, McIver asked Johnson, “In light of the blocked arteries that I had when I checked into the hospital, how much blood supply do I have now?”

“All you’ll ever need,” replied the terse surgeon.

Upon his discharge from the hospital, McIver’s wife, Lawanna, asked the doctor, “What about my husband’s future quality of life?”

Dr. Johnson paused and then said, “I fixed his heart; the quality of his life is up to him.”

God has done everything he can possibly do to help us with our relationship with him and our relationship with others. He has done everything he can to set us free from past things that pull us down and away from him, the rest is up to us. Are we making the choice, as is needed, to make God our one and only God, instead of the things and feelings that burden us, to allowing the grace of God to do its relentless work in us, and move forward one step at a time, into freedom from that which has been darkness in our lives? It’s our choice to make. Amen.