

Manteca Presbyterian Church

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Series: Unbroken

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“Forgiveness: the Healing of Our Wounds”

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Ephesians 6:12

12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Romans 8:28

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Introduction – Prison Camp

Last month we started looking at the story of former Olympic runner turned World War II Navy bombardier Louis Zamperini as told in the best selling book *Unbroken*. It was during a rescue effort that his bomber crashed into the Pacific where he and two other crew men found themselves floating on two small rafts. Eventually one of the rafts sank and one of the crew members died. Altogether Louis and Phil were on a raft for 47 days with little or no supplies until they were “rescued” by a hostile Japanese military.

As prisoners of the Japanese military, Louis and Phil along with all the other prisoners were tortured, humiliated and routinely beaten. They were subject to medical experiments, forced into slave labor and constantly starved. When they were given food, often it was indescribably awful.

Prisoners were forced into labor until they started to drop. A

particularly cruel form of punishment was for one of the guards to have all the enlisted prisoners hit their own officers in the face as hard as they could. If they didn't hit them hard enough, guards would club them. In one two hour period, all the officers, including Louis, got hit in the face by their own men about 220 times.

Conditions were so brutal that of the 34,000 prisoners of war in Japan, more than 37 percent died there, far more brutal than any of the other nations involved in World War II.

Prisoners sometimes fought back, sometimes in very creative ways. One example was a group of Scottish prisoners who were not only being starved; they were forced to load food on boats so that the enemy soldiers who were starving them would be able to eat in abundance.

So to fight back, Louis writes that these starving Scotsmen would drink excessive amounts of tea on the job. The enemy couldn't figure out why the Scots loved Japanese tea so much. Louis writes, *"It was actually an elegantly simple form of sabotage. The Scots would drink tea all day, then take turns urinating on the rice, so that by the time it reached its destination, it had spoiled."*

For Louis, his darkest moments involved a guard they nicknamed "The Bird." Louis says of the Bird *"He would beat POWs every day, fracturing their windpipes, rupturing their eardrums, shattering their teeth, tearing one man's ear half off, and leaving them unconscious. He combined physical with emotional torture. He wanted to humiliate, to destroy a prisoner's sense of humanity."*

A Resiliency to Deal with Evil

Louis would have to deal with the anger that naturally developed as a result of his experiences as a prisoner. What do you do when you're hurt, angry, and bitter? Where is God? How can we live an unbroken life in a world with evil that just won't go away? But deep within us, God has developed a capacity to deal with anger. It's a resiliency to forgive that we don't even know exists within us until we need it.

When we think of Louis, it wasn't fair that the meanest guard in the meanest military, the Bird, hated him the most. The first time Bird met him he beat him for not looking him in the eye, and then beat him for looking him in

the eye. He illegally kept him from being registered as a POW with the Red Cross so his family couldn't know he wasn't dead. He was assigned to clean up the pigsty, forced to use his bare hands with the filth, and eat slop for a pig to stay alive. On top of it, the Bird beat Louis every day and tried to humiliate and de-humanize him.

Time Alone Doesn't Heal All Wounds

Time isn't a guaranteed healer of all emotional wounds. Louis' physical and emotional suffering was so intense that even years later, after he was out of prison and back home, he began to experience flashbacks. He'd have nightmares every night about "The Bird." Once in a dream he was finally able to attack "the Bird." But when he woke up, he realized he was in his own bed, choking his pregnant wife.

He suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. His method of managing it involved alcohol and his life spiraled downward as a result. It's a common story for vets returning home from war. But Louis heard a young preacher named Billy Graham preach on John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

It took Louis awhile, but he eventually surrendered his life to Jesus. When he went home that night after accepting Christ, it was to a house full of wine, champagne, even a 300-year-old bottle of incredibly expensive cognac, and he knew what God was calling him to do. He took the wine and poured it down the drain. He took the champagne and poured it down the drain. He took the cognac and returned it for a whole lot of money. Then he went to bed and never had another nightmare about "the Bird."

I have to admit, that's a highly unusual and an amazingly quick recovery but with God all things are possible. Louie said, *"It's as if the doctor had cut the hating part of my brain away."* God can do that but we don't often see it done that way. For most of us it's a longer struggle. But what Louis' story illustrates is that God has planted the potential for forgiveness deep within us. That ability to forgive is a quality of God whose images we're made. It was displayed when Jesus was beat and nailed on a cross and God didn't retaliate and destroy everyone involved in that.

God didn't always demonstrate that quality early in his encounters with

humans. Read some of the Old Testament stories where a vengeful God destroys whole civilizations out of anger. But God has within himself and has planted in us the capacity to forgive that we don't know we have because it's often covered up with years of abuse. To unleash that capacity to forgive, we need Christ living his life through us and then to take some steps of faith to do things we didn't think we could do.

For Louis, one of those steps was to return to Japan after the war. Louis was quoted in Time Magazine, *"I'd rather be dead than return to that country. I couldn't stand Japan."* Then one day, he heard Bob Pierce, founder of the Christian relief agency World Vision. Pierce used to pray, *"Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God."* Pierce said, *"You know, there's a great need for Jesus Christ in Japan."* He told this crowd, *"Some of you ought to go back to Japan and bring Christ there."*

Louis strangely found himself convicted that God wanted him to go back to Japan. But understandably he didn't want to go. He prayed, *"Being a new Christian, Lord, I will need a good, swift, kick in the pants to understand if this is your will for me."*

On the way to his room at that conference, he got in a conversation with a young minister named Eric Folsom, and Eric said, *"Did you hear what Bob Pierce said about some people needing to go to Japan?"* Louis said, *"Yeah."* Eric said, *"I just have this feeling you ought to go. In fact, Louis, God has burdened my heart to give you \$500 to start you on your way to Japan."* Louis wrote, *"I didn't know whether to hug him or hit him."* Then a singing group who had heard Bob Pierce's talk came up and said, *"We want to give you our tithe money so God can send you to Japan."* So Louis went to Japan to the people and the place he hated.

In Tokyo, a missionary couple passed a message on from a former soldier, who said to them, *"I was one of those who beat Zamperini and broke his nose. Do you think he has really forgiven me?"* Louis wrote a note saying, *"I have,"* but as he did, he thought, *"You know, it's easy to write. Could I actually say it face to face?"* That's the thing about forgiveness. It's a nice theory as long as it's not tested.

Louis was invited to go out to the old World War II Camp Sugamo which was now housing every single one of the 850 war criminals in Japan. These

were the very men who had beaten him and others like them. He said, *"I gave my usual talk, but never with more conviction, about Jesus Christ, his death on the cross for sinners, his resurrection. When I came to the part about how I had been treated in Japanese prison camps, I thought about tempering the details and emotions, so as not to appear too angry, but I didn't, because otherwise my forgiveness would lack true meaning." "I thought this is so profound about how forgiveness is often a long journey, and it will always mean I will have to look at parts of me I didn't think I would have to look at." "It will always take courageous honesty. It is different than excusing. Forgiveness means truth about the wrongs done, coming to grips with how I have distorted stuff, as well as other people, because repentance and reconciliation, if they can happen at all, can only happen based on truth."*

Then Louis gave an evangelistic invitation: *Does anyone want to receive Christ?"* He was stunned at how many hands were raised. The commander of the camp said, *"Those of you who were Louis' guards and heads of prison camps, he'd like to speak to you personally. You may come forward if you wish."*

Imagine this moment. These people come forward. Louis sees them, numbers of them whom he's named in this book, who cursed him, beat him, starved him, and humiliated him. This was the big test of his soul, a moment most of us would like to avoid. Then a strange thing happened to him. He actually felt compassion and love for the men who beat him. The only way he could explain it after all the anger he once had for those men was that he had been given a gift from God to forgive. He leapt off the stage and down into the crowd. He started going up to these guards and embracing them and loving them. He was forgiving them. Only God could activate that kind of change and resiliency in someone. This is what Jesus brings.

One of the guards, James Sasaki who decided that day to become a Christian said, *"I don't understand how you can forgive us. Your Christianity must be real, but I don't understand it."* Louis said, *"It is real, and if you continue in your faith, one day you will understand."* For a whole bunch of people in Japan, that was their liberation day.

But the Bird, the man Louis had once wanted to return to Japan to kill was not there that day. Some thought he was dead but he was in hiding, avoiding the war criminal trials. Eventually he resurfaced and Louis was given his location. Now was his chance to kill the Bird.

Instead Louis reached out to him to bring reconciliation between the two men. Louis wrote a letter to the Bird seeking to meet up with him and reconcile. But the Bird wasn't interested. He didn't see that he had done anything wrong and could care less about Louis and reconciliation.

The lesson from Louis is that forgiveness is never dependent on the response or reaction of anyone. Overcoming anger isn't dependent on anyone other than ourselves. A wife doesn't have to wait for her husband who beats her to repent in order to forgive him. She just needs to **not** forget what he did and get out of there. Forgiveness is not forgetting what was done against us. God doesn't forget what we did for him on the cross. Proof of that is he gave us the sacrament of communion as a way to remember what we did and that he has still forgiven us. That's forgiveness.

Conclusion

Think about whom you need to reconcile with? Where does your heart need to forgive? What's God calling you to do right now? Where's God at work in your heart? Where have you gotten cold? Where have you just decided you're going to hold something against someone and put them in the category of somebody I don't have to love? What that will do is lead to what's called a hardened heart. In essence you're saying "I'm going to keep this bad attitude." "I'm going to have an unforgiving spirit." "I'm going to choose to do that."

Where do you need to say, "O God, forgive me. O God, help me. O God, I'm the one in prison"? Maybe it involves a spouse, or an ex-spouse. Maybe it's somebody in your family. Maybe it's somebody who hurt you badly. Maybe it's an experience you had in a church. Maybe you don't even know what to do yet, and that's all right. God will show you as you're ready.

Will you say right now, "God, I want to surrender my heart; I want to confess my unforgiving spirit in this particular area"? Then will you take Jesus seriously, and will you go? Will you stop making excuses? Will you stop letting yourself off the hook? Will you make the call? Will you schedule the time together? Will you confess what needs to get confessed? Will you honor Jesus Christ by having the ministry of reconciliation in your life?

IF YOU'D LIKE TO KNOW HOW TO GET STARTED IN FAITH

1. Recognize that everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's ideal
Romans 3:23

2. Know that the wages or payment for sinning is death
Romans 6:23

3. But God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to die for us
Romans 8:5

**4. It is our responsibility to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and allow
Him to become the master of our life**
Romans 10:13

Invite Jesus into your heart by praying something like the prayer below...

"Dear Lord Jesus, in many ways I have sinned against you. I am sorry and want to turn from my sinful ways. I invite you to come into my heart and begin to make me like yourself. I commit my life wholeheartedly to you now. Thank you for saving me."