

## ***THE EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY LIFE: Breaking the Power of the Past.***

*2 Corinthians 5:16-19; John 10:9-10.*

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### **STORIES TOLD OVER AND OVER**

Why do we tell some of the same stories over and over again? Families tell stories, over and over again, of things that were said or done years ago: why?

Churches tell stories. They talk about who did what or who said what or how a moment in the life of the church turned out. Stories are re-told, even of events from thirty or forty years ago: why?

We tell stories because our stories help us know who we are, don't they? Some stories define us.

And, sometimes, we tell stories over and over again so we can learn from the past *and not repeat it*. We go back, we hear the lesson, and we go forward differently. An earlier generation learned a lesson, perhaps in a particularly painful way, and we don't have to repeat that earlier mistake but move beyond it.

### **THE STORIES OF THE KINGS**

In my devotions, lately, some of the daily readings have included sections of 1st Kings. One after another, the writer tells us how people came to power, what they did, and how they were removed (usually violently) from the throne. After awhile, the same patterns seem to keep repeating: a king comes to power, a king stops listening to trusted advisors, a king turns his back on God and establishes pagan sanctuaries on hilltops, a king becomes cruel and murderous, and then the people rebel. Why does the writer of 1st and 2nd Kings tell these stories one after the other?

Don't you think it just might have been so that future kings might learn from earlier kings?

Why do they tell that story? Maybe so future kings will not be so full of themselves, so resistant to wise advisors, so indifferent and lacking in compassion for the people. Ambitious, impulsive, kings almost leads nations into misery.

Among those stories is the story of King Jeroboam. Who used idols to unify the people, as they worshipped at the pagan cultic sites and shrines on the hills. Jeroboam turned his back on God, built idols for the people, and tried to silence the prophets. Rather than listening to the prophets, Jeroboam threatened to arrest them. He shook his fist at one prophet, and the king's arm immediately became paralyzed in that threatening position.

The writer of 1st Kings tells us the king refused to turn from his evil ways, and instead helped people worship idols. It was all a great sin, the Bible writer says, and resulted "in the destruction of Jeroboam's kingdom and the death of all his family."

We tell stories from the past so we can live a different future.

We go back to go forward.

### **STEPPING OUT OF MUDDY BOOTS**

Remember, a couple of months ago, how I told you about the summers when my boys would play out at the edge of the farmer's fields on the south side of Mishawaka, in St. Joseph County?

One Spring day all three boys had been out there in the muddy clay. Two of my boys returned to the house, but Nathan was missing. Neither our oldest or youngest said a word about their brother and where he might be.

Then, we heard a distant, faint, voice shouting, "Help!" Walking to the back side of the house, I looked out over the yard that slopped down to the place where the field tile marked the boundary of the farmer's field to the north.

Standing in a corner of the muddy garden, I saw Nathan.

"Help!" the five year old shouted again.

"What's the problem?" I asked as he stood at the edge of the muddy garden.

"I can't move," he answered. "I'm stuck."

"Pull your feet up slowly and walk this way," I said to the boy who stood in the mud that went half-way up his rubber boots.

The boy struggled to keep his balance and pull his right leg up out of the mud. It doesn't budge. The brown clay is unyielding. There is a suction between the boot and the mud that won't give.

On the verge of panic, Nathan shouts, "Help me! Come get me!"

"Step out of your boots and walk across the garden," I shouted. "Leave the boots there. They're not going anywhere. You'll get your socks muddy. But you can get out of those boots and get out of the garden."

Nathan, after arguing with me for a bit, pulled one foot out of a boot and planted his stocking foot on the clay. Then, he pulled the other foot out of the other boot. Stood there on the clay. And began to walk across the freshly turned dirt of the garden towards me.

Sometimes you have to step out of your boots, out of the old way of thinking and doing, to live the real life Jesus came to give you.

## **JESUS AS THE GATE**

Jesus, in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, is using several different images to explain who he is...what role he can play in our lives. He is speaking to Pharisees. They're religious lawyers.

Lawyers are -generally- not into metaphors or poetic imagery. So they are confused. Jesus begins his conversation talking about sheep and a sheep pen and someone who is the shepherd of the sheep.

Then, Jesus is talking about a gatekeeper. The sheep listen to the voice of the shepherd... or the gatekeeper? It's not real clear. The religious experts and lawyers are confused. Absolutely lost.

So Jesus tries again. He's a good teacher. He backs up and starts again.

Jesus, in John 10:7, says he is "*the gate for the sheep*." You know, don't you, that Jesus isn't talking about sheep? Jesus is talking about people. Jesus is talking about you and me. He's talking about people who aren't sure where to go. We're out in the world, vulnerable, wondering where to go...where to find food...where to find shelter and protection when the night gets deep and the wild things roam. Jesus isn't talking about sheep: he's talking about us. The Galilean says he is the "*gate for the*

*sheep.*” A sheep goes through the gate to be fed, to be protected, to be watched over, and Jesus says he is the gate for us.

Then, Jesus says he is the good shepherd. He hasn’t come just to manage the sheep, or get wool from the sheep, or use the sheep, or threaten the sheep, or prove to the sheep who’s boss, but Jesus is a shepherd who loves the sheep. Who cares for the sheep. Who wants the best for the sheep. Who wants the sheep -as it says in verse 10- to have life *“to the full.”*

I love the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse: ***“I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.”***

The sheep matter so much to the good shepherd that he is willing to lay down his life for them. If his dying is what it will take to feed the sheep, protect the sheep, help the sheep live, then dying is what he’ll do.

Jesus says he is the gate for the sheep. He says he’s the one we go through if we want to find pasture. Food for our hearts and souls and minds. He says he’s the one we go through if we want to find real life. Life as it was meant to be.

So if you’re stuck in some old ways of thinking and living that don’t work well, if the way things have been done in your family or tribe or community or church seem to get in the way of real life instead of setting you free to live the kind of abundant life God wants for you, then maybe it is time to step out of those old ways.

“Step out of your boots,” the father says to the child. “Step out of your boots.”

## **THE GIFTS HANDED DOWN...and the junk**

We’ve had some wonderful gifts given to us by our tribe, by our family, by our parents and grandparents and the folks in our hometown who peopled the landscape of our lives, haven’t we?

My **Grandma Owen**, who helped raise me, **didn’t give up on people**. She had this way of connecting with all sorts of people, people who had it together and people who didn’t have it together, and she loved them. She didn’t give up on people. She just kept loving people. James Taylor sings that love can be like a steamroller but her love wasn’t like a steamroller. Her love was like this river that keeps running no matter how dry the summer might be...how deep the drought. I think some of that stubborn, persistent, kind of loving rubbed off on me. I tend not to give up on people. It takes a lot to run me off.

My Grandpa Owen loved **music**. They both loved music. In fact, when they lived down in Vincennes they had an orchestra that would go around and play for churches and school graduation parties. My Grandpa loved music and he loved politics and he loved Jesus. All of that sort of rubbed off on me. I think of them when I fire up my Apple Playlist and listen to Coldplay or James Taylor or Adele or Stravinsky. My Grandpa loved music and he just seemed delighted with being alive. He had eyes to see the little stuff, I think.

So we get these gifts that are handed down to us. By the people around us. By our family...our tribe...our community.

And then there are patterns that aren’t so helpful.

A friend of mine named **Susan** was raised in the home of an educator. She had an older brother. From the time she was a knee-high to a grasshopper her Dad made sure she understood that boys go to college. Although she was as bright as a whip she

was told over and over again that she wasn't all that bright, and she didn't need to think about college. Not only is Susan bright but she has all sorts of leadership gifts, and her Dad -who loves her very much- said that she didn't have to worry about leading. She could leave that to others.

I didn't know all that history until I got to know Susan. I was her pastor. I saw these leadership gifts in her, and so I asked her to serve...to lead. When people were curious about good books to read or materials to use in their small group at church, they would turn to Susan because she was a voracious reader. She knew stuff!

Every time she began to lead, though, she would think to herself, "What are you doing? Who do you think you are? You have no business leading...it's just a matter of time until you mess this up." Susan was always second guessing herself. Always apologizing. Because her father's voice was inside her head telling her that she wasn't that smart and that women don't lead. I know her Dad loves her but her Dad has given Susan some trash. Her Dad has handed down some dysfunctional stuff that is limiting her life. The past has a power over her life that needs to be broken.

"Step out of your boots," the father says to the child. "Step out of your boots."

There are families, churches, organizations, and businesses that have dysfunctional, life-limiting patterns that have been handed down from generation to generation. The same games keep getting played. The same patterns keep being lived out. It's like wet clay in a spring garden. That holds us in place...that keeps us from moving forward or trying to new things.

As I have work with different congregations, I listen to their history and am surprised to see how the same kinds of moments, of crises, arrive over and over again almost as if on schedule. People will be struggling to heal or find a way forward, and I will say to them, "You know, you have been here before. Have you ever heard about what happened in the worship committee or with the trustess in 1992 or 2012?"

One congregation was in the middle of a roaring debate over worship styles. Some people were going to leave because a drum kit was being placed in the sanctuary. After reading their history, one Sunday I reminded them that in the 1890's the leaders of that Methodist Church voted to install a pipe organ. The Trustees saw that as a worldly instrument, used in road houses, and they padlocked the sanctuary. A group of organ fans broke in one night, and installed the organ under cover of darkness.

"Debates about worship have divided you before," I said. "Don't let that happen again. Whether we sing with a pipe organ or accompanied by drums, let God be glorified."

Sometimes, I tell members of a congregation about a part of their story, and they want to argue with me. "Oh, that didn't happen here!" they insist. But it did happen. I had read their history or listened to some stories, and I tell them that this isn't the first time the Cemetery Association squabbled with the Trustees or the choir came apart at the seams or a few disgruntled members sent a pastor packing.

"Step out of your boots," the father says to the child. "Step out of your boots."

## **FAMILY OR CHURCH COMMANDMENTS**

Pastor Peter Scazzerro, along with a host of other writers, talks about how families and churches can have family rules or commandments. What rules or commandments

were in control of your family growing up? How are those still at work, or have some been left behind, in your family life or church life or organizational life today?

One commandment in our family was serving is important. Even if serving destroys you.

One commandment in our family was conflict is always bad. We always get along.

One commandment in our family was that it is selfish to say what you want or need.

You can find, in Scazzerro's books and in the sermon notes, a list of the commandments he says families sometimes operate by.

## **MORE THAN A HEEL GRABBER**

Jacob's name meant something like "heel grabber." Because he had his hand wrapped around his older twin's heel at birth. People saw him as a cheat and a wheeler-dealer.

But the story of Jacob, in the Bible, is a reminder that we can move beyond the family drama.

What he wants is to stop living as a heel grabber, a manipulator, fueled by a desperate need to win every encounter...to always be first. Jacob wants to stop living a life where he is always on the run from his past. So he and God wrestle all night, one night, out there in the wilderness.

God asks Jacob, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answers.

God then says, "Your name will no longer be Heel Grabber or Deceiver but Israel. Your new name means 'he who struggles with God' because you have wrestled with God and human beings and overcome."

Jacob wants a new start.

God gives him a new name.

"Step out of your boots," the father says to the child. "Step out of your boots."

## **STEPS TO BREAKING THE POWER OF THE PAST**

There are some fundamentals to breaking the power of a dysfunctional, unhealthy, life-damaging past. Some of you have been in recovery. Some of you have worked through hard stuff and learned new ways of living. I'd like to hear what you have found to be important or helpful in breaking the power of the past.

Here are some suggestions I would make this morning. The list is partial... incomplete.

**First, be curious.** About yourself, your patterns, your fears, your hopes. We've talked about this for a few weeks. The unexamined life is not worth living, Socrates is to have said. Be curious.

**Second, be courageously open and honest.** Most of us have some level of defensiveness. Being vulnerable and open was not encouraged in our family church. Admitting you may be wrong was -you were taught- always a sign of weakness.

The other evening we watched the Netflix special on the submersible, *Titan*, that imploded when it was 12,000 below the surface of the Atlantic Ocean carrying people to the wreck of the *Titanic*. The story is the story about one man who was sure he was right, and who got rid of everyone who questioned the safety and engineering of the submersible.

We can't break the power of the past if we are not courageously open and honest. Every time I read the letters of St Paul, I am amazed at how honest he is about his own struggles and his tendencies. He tends to brag about his credentials and educational, when the Church Council criticizes him. At one point in his letters, he cries out and talks about how he has a battle going on inside. The good he would do he doesn't do, and the evil he would avoid he ends up doing.

I know my tendency to be a people pleaser can get in the way of honest relationships and faithful leadership. Loving and leading a congregation means telling them things they want to hear and telling them things they need to hear but don't want to hear. So I have to watch that "people pleasing" part of me.

Be courageous. Be honest.

**Third, if you are going to change, make it a partnership project.**

Ask God to help. Don't leave God on the sidelines. Prayer helps.

Second, ask someone you trust, or a group you trust, for their prayers and honest support. There is a man named Wayne leading a men's ministry at the State Prison at Westville. He is all about helping men learn how to be faithful, honest, men of integrity. And much of that work happens in groups. We need partners. We need people who know us and speak honestly to us. A friend of mine, a wonderful pastor, told me near the beginning of our friendship about his past battles with a drug addiction. He wanted me to know.

If we are going to break the power of the past, we need partners. We need God. We need others. Remember how, in the story of the conversion of Saul, Jesus sends him someone named Ananias to lead him by the hand, and to watch over him?

**Fourth, get ready for the anger.** Pastor Scazerro, after nearly wrecking himself and his marriage because he could never say "No", learned how to say "No." He chose not to be always available. Some church members were angry about that. They didn't like it.

People in AA have told me how angry some of their friends, and even family members, became when they stopped drinking. The people around them had gotten used to the old patterns...even if they were destructive.

You change, you break some long-established patterns, and some people in your life are going to push-back. Be ready if some people you love get angry with you for changing.

**Fifth, develop a plan.**

What needs to change? How will you do that? What are your goals? How will you know you are where God wants you to be?

Jesus said no one builds a tower or building without first counting the cost.

It doesn't need to be a perfect plan, but developing a plan is a good thing. If you need to develop a budget, what are your first three steps in doing that...in getting control of your spending? If you are going to address your addiction to pornography, who will be your accountability partner? Who will help you load software on your phone or computer to limit your access to that soul-damaging stuff? If you are going to address that childhood trauma that happened to you when you were twelve, how, where and when will you start?

Develop a plan.

### **Sixth, change takes time and it happens -usually- with small steps.**

When I spent a week in Ireland, I needed to learn some new skills. I love driving a car with a manual transmission, but in Ireland that meant sitting on the right side of the car and using my left hand to shift gears. I remember sitting at the first stop light, at the Dublin airport, watching traffic race by on the airport road, and telling myself, "Go left, go left, go left." I just needed to make it through that first intersection. Then, I would face the next intersection. Get down the road a few kilometers.

Change takes time.

Some changes are easy. Some changes are unspeakably hard.

And, remember this: sometimes you grow in the right direction, with God's help and a supportive team, but you may also slip back. Growth and change, like the stock market, is not a steady, upward predictable line. Sometimes the markets are up and sometimes down.

One of the saints in my life was the late Brennan Manning. An apostle of grace, the Irishman fought a lifelong battle with alcohol. He won the battle, and then he lost a skirmish. He recovered, was healthier, blessed others with his books and sermons, and then stumbled again.

You won't always get it right.

Remember the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.

Remember grace. Remember the unmerited love of the Father.

As people have reminded me when I have failed, grace isn't just for others: grace is for you.

### **THE LAWYER TURNED POET**

Last week we were with Saul. You remember Saul? A bright and gifted man who was raised a devout Jew in the city of Tarsus. He was filled with a holy desire to serve God, and he decided to "take on" these new Christians who insisted the Son of God had been born to a girl from Galilee who had been pregnant before getting married. He was roaring through life. Driven by self-righteousness and anger.

Then, according to Acts 9, on the road to Damascus he is stopped in his tracks by God. And he is changed - by God.

In one of the letters he writes years later, Paul says (2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:17) "*if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come.*" In *The Message* this verse is paraphrased "*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!*"

I know it's hard to believe.

You can't teach an old dog new tricks.

A leopard can't change its spots.  
You are who you are and you're gonna be who you've been.  
I know it's hard to believe we can break the power of the past.  
I know it's hard to believe we can become a new creation, even though Paul says in 2nd Corinthians that when we are in Christ we are becoming something...someone...new.

I know it's hard to believe. It may be in the Bible but it's still hard to believe!

Then, you find yourself reading through the letter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians and bump into the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter. Some scholars call it Paul's "Love Chapter" or "Love Poem." You realize that the angry, bitter, violent, self-righteous man who was headed for Damascus to cause more damage wrote these words after he walked through the Jesus gate:

*<sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

*<sup>13</sup> And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

Something happened...someone changed...the power of the past was broken...out there on the road. The old, angry lawyer has become a poet...an apostle...of grace.

Breaking free of the past, getting a new name, becoming a new creation, has something to do with walking through the Jesus gate. Entering that gate is a radical step that involves dying to some old stuff so you and I can live free. Opening the Jesus gate is a dying and rising thing. The way it has been isn't the way it always has to be, you know?

I wouldn't say becoming a new creation is possible and then I read those words in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13.

"Step out of your boots," the father says to the child. "Step out of your boots."



Peter Scazerro talks about different kinds of families, and he offers us this list of family commandments. Maybe some of these are familiar in your family? Maybe some of these have been at work in the church.

## **TEN COMMANDMENTS OF THE FAMILY**

### **1. MONEY**

- Money is the best source of security.
- The more money you have the more important you are.
- Make lots of money to prove you “made” it.

### **2. CONFLICT**

- Avoid conflict at all costs.
- Don’t get people mad at you.
- Loud, angry, fighting is normal. (=winning)

### **3. SEX**

- Sex is not something to talk about openly.
- Men can be promiscuous, women are not to be.
- Sexuality in marriage happens easily.

### **4. GRIEF AND LOSS**

- Sadness is weakness.
- You are not allowed to be “down” or depressed.
- Get over your losses and move on. Let it go - NOW.

### **5. EXPRESSING ANGER**

- Anger is dangerous and bad.
- Anger a tool - exploding is okay & to control.
- Sarcasm is an acceptable way to release anger.

### **6. FAMILY**

- You owe your parents for all they’ve done for you.
- Don’t speak of your family’s struggles in public.
- Duty to family, your race and culture, comes first.

### **7. RELATIONSHIPS**

- Don’t trust people. They will let you down.
- Nobody will ever hurt me again - protect yourself!
- Don’t show vulnerability.

### **8. ATTITUDES TOWARDS DIFFERENT PEOPLE/CULTURES**

- Only be close friends with people who are like you, believe like you, etc.
- Do not marry a person of another race, culture, faith, or group.
- Certain cultures/races are not as good as mine.

### **9. SUCCESS**

- Is achieving...never failing.
- Getting into the best schools.
- Making lots of money.
- Living in the right neighborhoods.
- Being able to have your way (power).
- Being married, having children.

### **10. FEELING AND EMOTIONS**

- You are not allowed to have certain feelings.
- Your feelings are not important - only facts.
- Feelings and emotions are a sign of immaturity.
- Letting your feelings control you, being reactive, is okay. "I must be right because that is the way I feel!"

## **FAMILY SYSTEMS** *(one way of looking at families)*

- **Family in Pain**
  - Severe distress. Immaturity, chaos, confusion, and turmoil.
  - Conflicts never addressed in a healthy way or resolved.
  - No rules.
  - No ability to look at issues with clarity.
- **Borderline Family**
  - Polarized relationships.
  - Dictatorship rules.
  - Rules - all black and white.
  - Rigidity - in thinking, feeling, behaving.
  - Everyone expected to act, feel, think, and behave the same.
  - Disagreement or questions not allowed.
- **Rule-Bound Family**
  - Not in chaos or a dictatorship.
  - To feel loved and accepted is to obey the rules.
  - "If you love me, you'll do what you know I approve of."
  - Rules matter more than the individual.
  - Subtle manipulation, intimidation, and guilt permeates.
- **Adequate to Optimal Family**
  - Ability to be flexible.
  - The individual cherished while valuing closeness.
  - Difficulties and conflicts worked through.
  - Freedom to look at our past, learn, and live a different future.
  - Feelings okay, trust high, and a sense of teamwork. "We are together."