

5.10.09

**Facing Our Fear of Past Hurts and Wounds**

Psalm 23:5; Luke 7:36-50

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Psalm 23 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters, <sup>3</sup> he restores my soul.

He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,<sup>a</sup>

I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Luke 7:36-50, "One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. <sup>37</sup> And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. <sup>39</sup> Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, *"If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner."* <sup>40</sup> Jesus spoke up and said to him, *"Simon, I have something to say to you."* "Teacher," he replied, "speak." <sup>41</sup> *"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii,<sup>k</sup> and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?"* <sup>43</sup> Simon answered, *"I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt."* And Jesus said to him, *"You have judged rightly."* <sup>44</sup> Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, *"Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup> Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."* <sup>48</sup> Then he said to her, *"Your sins are forgiven."* <sup>49</sup> But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, *"Who is this who even forgives sins?"* <sup>50</sup> And he said to the woman, *"Your faith has saved you; go in peace."*

**Key Verse**

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<sup>a</sup> Or *through the darkest valley*

<sup>k</sup> The denarius was the usual day's wage for a laborer

*"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*

*You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."*

Someone sent me the following story written by a mother:

Last week I took my children to a restaurant. My six-year-old son asked if he could say grace. As we bowed our heads he said, *"God is great. God is good. Thank you for the food, and I would thank you even more if mom gets us ice cream for dessert. And liberty and justice for all! Amen!"*

Along with laughter from the other customers nearby, I heard a woman remark, *"That's what's wrong with this country. Kids today don't even know how to pray. Asking God for ice cream! Why, I never!"*

Hearing this, my son burst into tears and asked me, *"Did I do it wrong? Is God mad at me?"* As I held him and assured him that he had done a terrific job and God was certainly not mad at him, an elderly gentleman approached our table.

He winked at my son and said, *"I happen to know that God thought that was a great prayer."*

*"Really?"* my son asked. *"Cross my heart."* Then in a theatrical whisper he added (indicating the woman whose remark had started the whole thing), *"Too bad she never asks God for ice cream. A little ice cream is good for the soul sometimes."*

Naturally, I bought my kids ice cream at the end of the meal. My son stared at his for a moment. Then he picked up his sundae and without a word walked over and placed in front of the woman who had acted like an enemy.

With a big smile he told her, *"Here, this is for you. Ice cream is good for the soul sometimes and my soul is good already."*

*"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."*

In the psalms, including psalm 23, enemies have a central place in prayer to God. In some psalms they are military foes, in others we can't be sure. Enemies can be judgmental, insensitive people such as the woman in the restaurant or the Pharisee in Luke's story. Enemies in the psalms may be sickness, ungodly people, the wicked who harm or hurt us, even anxiety or the fear of death.

Most of us want to be protected from enemies. In Psalm 23:1-4, God is portrayed as the good Shepherd who cares for the flock; in verses 5 and 6, Yahweh is the Host who offers hospitality to a guest and protects the guest from enemies. According to the law of hospitality, once a traveler was received into the shepherd's tent, and especially once his host has spread food before him, he is guaranteed safety from enemies who may be trying to overtake him.

We fear an enemy because an enemy can hurt or wound us. Most people are carrying around wounds that other folks are unaware of – the list of such hurts and wounds is long and unique to each person. Some are more obvious than others; some are perceived to be more acceptable than others, such as the death of a loved one than say a child who is dealing or doing drugs or a family member unable to get free from addiction. **The truth is you never know what a**

**person is carrying around unseen beneath the surface.** Of course, some physical wounds are hard not to notice. Many of us were probably amazed to see Connie Culp on TV this week at a news conference at the Cleveland Clinic. She is the woman who had a face transplant. She said she still thinks about how she looked before her husband shot her in the face in a failed murder-suicide in 2004. Incredibly in an interview Friday with ABC's "Good Morning America," the 46-year-old Ohio, woman **said she forgives her husband**, who went to prison for seven years. Culp says she now feels great walking down the street. Some people have hurts, wounds, or challenges that appear staggering yet handle them with stunning grace and they are inspiring to us.

Another headline that caught my attention read: *"Woman without arms or legs cares for her child."* The front page of a Texas newspaper a few years ago carried the picture of a young and beautiful mother born without arms and legs. The State Department of Public Welfare had charged in court that she was incapable of taking care of her five-month-old daughter. During the court hearing the mother surprised everyone by proving she was competent to take care of her baby. There, before their eyes, she undressed and then dressed the baby again by using only her lips and tongue.

The judge was so impressed that he not only awarded custody of the baby to her, but said, *"I have to commend you very much for your courage, spirit, and ingenuity ... You have proven that physical endowments are only a part of the spectrum of resources that human beings possess."*

**The young mother did not dwell on what she did not have. Rather, she chose to use to the utmost what God had given to her.**

David, the author of Psalm 23, learned to fight with courage by defending his father's sheep against predators and later with God's help he defeated the giant Goliath and many other enemies in battle. He was also deeply wounded by his own sin as well as the betrayal of his son and others close to him. He was writing out of his own experience when he said, *"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."*

Learning to face our fears of past, or even present hurts and wounds, begins with a willingness to come to the table God prepares for us. The Lord prepares a table for us, but we are the ones who choose whether we will come and sit down so the Lord can nourish and anoint us. We are the ones who decide whether we will trust God and let go of the past. We are the ones who decide if we will repent and change our thinking, speaking, or behavior when we have sinned and hurt and wounded someone else, we are the ones who decide if we will release someone, even an enemy, who has hurt or wounded us, by forgiving them.

It is good to hear stories "like that of Elwin Wilson of Rock Hills, South Carolina. On May 9, 1961, when the Congress of Racial Equality's (CORE) Freedom Riders came into town and attempted to enter an all white waiting room at the bus station, Ku Klux Klan member Elwin

Wilson was there. When he saw future U.S. Representative John Lewis enter, Wilson attacked, pummeling the young civil rights worker, who responded with nonviolence.

This was not the first or last time that Lewis would face abuse as a leader in the civil rights movement. During sit-ins, the freedom rides, and at the front of the marchers who were violently abused with batons on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, on “Bloody Sunday,” Lewis was beaten numerous times. But, according to Lewis, none of the men who beat and abused him had ever apologized—until now.

In January, 2009 Elwin Wilson contacted Representative Lewis to apologize for beating Lewis nearly 48 years ago. For several weeks, Wilson apologized to members of the African-American community in Rock Hills for his numerous acts of racial hatred. He had the guts to say “*I’m sorry.*” And Representative John Lewis responded to this former member of the KKK with mercy, grace, and forgiveness, and now refers to Wilson as a friend.

The story of John Lewis and Elwin Wilson needs to be told and remembered. Parts of it are regrettable, and yet the power of forgiveness and healing found in their recent encounter is the gospel at work in a broken and fallen world. It is a tremendous example of facing past hurts and wounds. Unfortunately, these types of apologies are far too rare. In fact, Lewis said that Elwin Wilson was the very first person out of the hundreds who attacked and abused him during the civil rights struggle to say “*I’m sorry.*”<sup>1</sup>

Forgiveness helps to heal hurts and wounds. Psalm 23:5 speaks of being anointed with oil and that is very soothing, it was one of the ways wounds were treated in the time of the Bible. Robert Cheeseborough believed in his product. He is the man who invented Vaseline, a petroleum jelly refined from rod wax, the ooze that forms on the shafts of oil rigs. He so believed in the healing properties of his product that he became his own guinea pig; he burned himself with acid and flame; he cut and scratched himself so often and so deeply that he bore the scars of his tests the rest of his life. But he proved his product worked. People had only to look at his wounds, **now healed**, to see the value of his work and the extent of his belief. The disciple Thomas needed to see the wounds of crucifixion on the risen Christ to believe, but we are told, “*Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.*”

When we are anointed with the oil of God’s Spirit, we are healed. Like Robert Cheeseborough, we may bear the scars of past hurts and wounds for the rest of our lives, but the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm assures us there can be healing in our relationships, even with our enemies; there can be healing for our emotions and for memories of wounds that run deep, that happened even when we were children.

At the heart of the story we heard from the Gospel of Luke is a woman who carried hurts and wounds who also knew she was a sinner. She brought an alabaster jar of ointment, stood

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<sup>1</sup> **Troy Jackson** is senior pastor of University Christian Church in Cincinnati and author of [\*Becoming King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Making of a National Leader \(Civil Rights and the Struggle for Black Equality in the Twentieth Century\)\*](#)

behind Jesus, weeping, bathing his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. This is a very intimate act. This is happening in the home of a Pharisee who is stunned and scandalized that this is taking place and shocked that Jesus would allow this woman to touch him in this way. Before we act all self-righteous about how we are better than the Pharisee and condemn him for his attitude, ask yourself what your response would be, how comfortable would you be, if you were at a dinner at someone's house with me, and a woman came in who was not invited and began to bathe my feet with her tears and kiss my feet and anointed them with oil – don't tell me I wouldn't be called in to an urgent meeting with the Advisory Council!

The Pharisee hosting the dinner, much like the woman at the restaurant I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon, is self-righteously sure of his own goodness. He shows Jesus no outpouring of unreserved, unabashed love. He doesn't even perform the basic, expected acts of hospitality. He is judged by his own words and deeds. The woman demonstrates her love through the overflow of her tears and the anointing she gives Jesus and she leaves forgiven and in peace. Like this woman, the tears caused by our hurts and wounds can be replaced with the anointing oil of God's healing and forgiveness.

Psalms 23 speaks of a table graciously spread in the presence of enemies, and the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:26 that death is, "*The last enemy to be destroyed.*" Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we remember how Jesus was wounded, broken, and died so that even the last enemy would be destroyed.

The following true story was told to Philadelphia psychologist Jack Kornfield by the director of a nearby rehabilitation program for violent juvenile offenders: One 14-year-old boy in the program had shot and killed an innocent teenager to prove himself to his gang. At the trial, the victim's mother sat impassively silent until the end, when the youth was convicted of the killing. After the verdict was announced, she stood up slowly and stared directly at him and stated, "*I'm going to kill you.*" Then the youth was taken away to serve several years in the juvenile facility. After the first half-year the mother of the slain child went to visit his killer. He had been living on the streets before the killing, and she was the only visitor (in jail) he'd had. For a time they talked, and when she left she gave him some money for cigarettes. Then she started step-by-step to visit him more regularly, bringing food and small gifts.

Near the end of his three-year sentence, she asked him what he would be doing when he got out. He was confused and very uncertain, so she offered to help set him up with a job at a friend's company. Then she inquired about where he would live, and since he had no family to return to, she offered him temporary use of the spare room in her home. For eight months he lived there, ate her food, and worked at the job.

Then one evening she called him into the living room to talk. She sat down opposite him and waited. Then she started,

*"Do you remember in the courtroom when I said I was going to kill you?"*

*"I sure do," he replied. "I'll never forget that moment."*

*"Well, I did it," she went on. "I did not want the boy who could kill my son for no reason to remain alive on this earth. I wanted him to die. That's why I started to visit you and bring you things. That's why I got you the job and let you live here in my house. That's how I set about changing you.*

*And that old boy, he's gone. So now I want to ask you, since my son is gone, and that killer is gone, if you'll stay here. I've got room and I'd like to adopt you if you let me."* And she became the mother he never had.

**Prayer:** Merciful God, you know what is in the deepest recesses of our hearts, minds, bodies, and memories. You know the hurts and wounds we carry. We also know and believe that you are the God who heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. Lord, if our wounds are because we have sinned against you and others; help us repent and turn from them in this very moment while we still can. Be gracious to us and forgive, heal, and restore us. Create a clean heart within us and put a new and right spirit within us.

Gracious God, if we have been hurt or wounded and unable to forgive, to release, to let go of what happened – we pray today that you would heal, redeem and renew us. Renew our spirit and restore to us the joy of your salvation. Anoint us with your healing Spirit and may your steadfast love and mercy overflow toward us today and forever, in Jesus' name. Amen.