

The Other Side of Ugly Experiences

by Todd Atkinson

The sermon emphasizes the transformative power of faith and community in overcoming ugly experiences through the lens of the early Christians' journey.

Duration: 1:07:16

Topics: "Experiences"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on the early followers of Jesus and the kind of community they shared. The first characteristic highlighted is their obedience to Jesus' commandments. They were a believing body, waiting in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father. Despite witnessing the worst forms of ugliness and experiencing betrayal and injustice, they remained focused, innocent, and trusting in God. The speaker encourages the audience to be inspired and challenged by the early Christians' unwavering faith.

Transcript

Good morning, everyone. You're getting much better, though. It's great to, um, great to worship with you today.

Just, just so precious. Our sincerest thanks to those who lead us in worship, Sunday by Sunday. I love, um, our smaller settings, I love our bigger settings, I love to be able to just look around and see everybody.

The Lord has put in our lives. Um, also there's just so many new people here today. And, and, and we try to get around and get to know you.

It's really important to us that you've come. Because every single one of us were, were new people here not too long ago. And I've only been here for nine and a half years myself.

And, and probably the vast majority of people here are, are, are actually under eight or nine years. And, and many of them under three or four years. And so, um, I know you might think that they look like they've, they're close, that they've journeyed together for a long time.

You might be surprised that, um, some people here might only be here weeks or months ahead of you. But it, it's always worth taking the time, making the effort. To meet people and know those around us and just all the, enjoy the gifts that God gives us in the form of new people.

Today marks the first Sunday in the season of Lent. And in our church we have found it a valuable practice to follow what's called the church year or the liturgical year. Which has been a practice of the church since, since first century.

Which is to take the great high points of the gospel. Jesus' birth. His perfect life.

His sacrificial death. His mighty resurrection. His glorious ascension.

The outpouring of the spirit. And to make sure that those are celebrated and there's focus given to those through our entire year. That we give adequate attention to things that the New Testament gives enormous attention to.

And, and to make sure that we're, that we're not bogged down on secondary things when we should be giving our attention to primary matters. And so we, we, it's become a very important part of our, of our spiritual journey and our spirituality here at the church. So this time of the liturgical year has been called Lent.

If you'd like to know the word Lent is derived from an Anglo-Saxon word called Lenten. And it means spring because the bulk of Lent tends to happen in the month of March. And, and whoever gave it that word didn't come from Canada.

The kind of great tundra. Because March here doesn't really look like spring does it? But, but anyways, that's, that word was arrived at at a place some part of the world that wasn't frozen in March. And so it has been, Lent has been a time of preparation, of heart preparation.

That we might give the most wonderful celebration and worship around the cross and the empty tomb, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. And so as we have described this each year and given these special times to, to, to remember special things, it's been a very important part of our church life. And so I pray for you that over this Lenten period that your worship of the Christ who died for you and rose again would, would heighten.

I'd like to turn your attention to the book of Acts again this morning. If you're new here, we're on a, on a series through the book of Acts. We're, been working on this series for a number of months and I'd like to turn your attention to chapter 1 again.

We will eventually get out of chapter 1. But, but listen, I'm having fun, what's the hurry? Chapter 1 verse 14. And I'd like to, to pay attention just to this one verse and in fact the, the first half of this verse. Okay, you'll remember that Jesus asked his apostles and his early followers to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the spirit and so they did.

They went in Jerusalem and this verse describes what was happening as they waited. Simply says, all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer. Together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers.

That's, that's not a lot of words, just a handful of words. But to me there is so much truth conveyed to us in those few simple words that they're descriptive. Descriptive of, of the earliest followers of Jesus and the kind of community that they shared in.

So first of all it tells me that they were obedient because in Acts 1 verse 4 it says Jesus ordered them or commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem. So here's a body of people that know how to heed the commandments of Jesus. They're here because Jesus commanded them to be, he told them to be.

And there are people who never took the commandments of Jesus lightly. They're a, a believing body. He says wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the father, the father had made a promise.

Here's a group of people that know how to receive a promise and believe a promise. They are a patient people, an enduring people because they were asked to wait in Jerusalem until the coming of the Holy Spirit. They didn't know how long that would be.

And they didn't ask him how long that would be. They didn't say well I guess we could wait for a few hours or I guess we could hang around for a few days. They were determined to wait until that promise was fulfilled.

And so there's a patience and endurance about them. They were a united people. It says they waited with one accord.

They're not fractured but they're together and they're one in their waiting. They're a people of great devotion. They're devoted.

They're wholehearted. They're prayerful. It says they devoted themselves to prayer.

And the other thing that amazes me is not only what I do see in this people. The other thing that amazes me is what I don't see. And that is I don't see hesitation.

I don't see a faltering. I don't see a wavering. I don't see a holding back.

I don't see a reluctance, a reluctance to engage. I don't see a slowness to believe. They are fully in this group of people.

And that's significant. Because not many days before this prayer meeting, life to them looked a little bit like hell on earth. Fifty to sixty days only.

Less than a two month span of time. And life looked very different than it did for them on this day. Think of some of the things that life held out for them only fifty days before this.

They had experienced intense betrayal. Their friend and comrade Judas betrayed them all. He was like one of their inner circle.

It's okay to have someone out there but do that. But one of your inner circle, one of your closest friends, he's one of the people they had trained with. He's one of the people they had traveled with.

He's one of the people that they had trusted. They had ministered with. They had broke bread with.

And how could they not feel that sense of betrayal? Fifty days only before this time. They had experienced injustice. The leaders of their nation, those who were charged with protecting them, have now turned on them.

What would that be like? The whole nation literally turned on them. And all the authorities in that nation, those that were protecting them, were now treating their lives as worth nothing. Injustice, that's got to hurt.

Hypocrisy. The very leaders who had taught them to expect the Messiah are now fighting against them for following the Messiah. They're actually acting contrary to everything they'd always taught them through their lives.

Expect the Messiah. Prepare yourself for the coming of the Messiah. They're just doing exactly as they were taught.

And now they're being persecuted for it. Disappointment. Things definitely did not turn out as they expected.

I love the story of the disciples on the Emmaus Road. It's my favorite story. How there's two of the disciples and they're leaving Jerusalem.

They're told to stay in Jerusalem. They are leaving Jerusalem. And when Jesus comes alongside of them in a kind of disguise, he describes these two disciples and says they look downcast.

They're sad. And he asks them, what's wrong? And he said, well have you not heard of him who has died of Jesus? We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. We had hoped.

We don't anymore. They're hopeless. Their hopes have been dashed only less than two months before this prayer meeting.

And probably the one that topped the charge was a sense of personal failure. Jesus said you'll all fall away because of me. Jesus boasted the rest of these characters.

They may all fall away because of you. But I will never fall away. You ever did something that you told yourself your whole life you wouldn't do? Disappointed yourself severely? If it wasn't bad enough for an entire nation to turn on you.

If it wasn't bad for the leaders that you have loved and trusted your whole life to turn against you. If it wasn't bad enough for someone in your inner circle to betray you, their own hearts have betrayed them. Personal failure.

It's a killer. In addition, they had seen firsthand bloodshed, cruelty, heartlessness, lawlessness, abusiveness. Literally they saw the very worst in human nature because they saw the most ugly and heinous sides of the human condition.

How could you see all that and 50 days later, less than 2 months later, they're in this prayer meeting. They don't seem shackled, crushed, checked out, destroyed, carrying the baggage of only 2 months later. They're innocent.

They're believing like praying like of course God's going to answer our prayers. Focused spiritually. Not distracted.

I feel inspired by that. I feel challenged by that. Here's a group of early Christians, Jesus followers, who have seen the very worst forms of ugliness and yet they're not down in the dumps.

They're praying earnestly. They're not doubting. They're trusting.

They're not hopeless but they're hopeful. They're not holding back from their experiences. I don't need a show of hands to ask how many of you experienced betrayal.

I don't need a show of hands to say how many of you have experienced injustice, misunderstanding. I don't need a show of hands to say how many have ever been disappointed by seeing hypocrisy. How many of those have been disappointed in yourselves through personal failure? I know my own story.

I don't need a show of hands. So the question is, what was their secret? Sometimes I can have something happen to me 20 years ago and I'm still holding back. I'm still being affected by it.

How in less than two months period of time do these people see something that is far worse than I've ever seen? In less than two months, they've shed it. They're whole. Their hearts are open to God and to one another.

And it's because something happened between those painful experiences and this prayer meeting. It's only two months period of time, but something happened in that period of time. In fact, two things happened in that period of time.

They're called the cross and the resurrection. You see, they saw Jesus go through the very same things they had went through, but what worse, much worse in fact. They had been betrayed by Judas.

Jesus had been betrayed by the whole lot. Matthew 26, 33 says, then all his disciples left him and fled. Universal betrayal.

They may have been misunderstood and manhandled. They weren't tortured cruelly. They were disappointed, but he suffered, bled and died.

And so they saw this. Whatever they had experienced, they looked upon a Savior who had experienced that much and a thousand times more. And only a few days later, they got to see something firsthand that changed their lives.

They got to be firsthand witnesses of the resurrection. And that taught them something. To have seen the crucifixion on a Sunday, on a Friday, and only a few days later to have been an eyewitness of the resurrection taught them something.

That God is able to bring good out of evil. That there is something on the other side of suffering. Something wonderful on the other side of pain.

Because remember, at the time of the crucifixion, they felt that's it. That's all our hopes. But it only took a couple days to find out that with God, there's always another side of pain.

With God, there's always something on the other side of death. And so not only did they learn something about their Savior, that everything he told them was true. He said he would die.

He said he would rise again. He can be trusted. But there's something else that took place, and as their story unfolded, it directly affected how they understood their own story.

This afternoon, we have a baptism. How wonderful. All kinds of new people coming to Christ.

For us, the immigrant population of Lethbridge has just been a joy. We absolutely love our Nepali-speaking population. All kinds are getting baptized this afternoon.

On Sunday, there's a whole other group that are being prepared. I also thought you'd let you know Rob Steele just texted me this week saying that last Sunday in the service, we had a time of prayer between kind of the time of the Word and the Q&A and the Lord's table. And he just wrote me yesterday to say that there was a girl who came to faith there.

There was seven or eight new people. We didn't even know who they were. So a friend of Nathaniel Lockhart's and so they met with him this week and just to say she had come to faith and she starts into catechism, into baptismal training, preparation this week.

So when a church plant sees its first person, I mean, they've already seen incredible miracles, people coming back to faith, coming back and engaging with Jesus in his church again. But to see someone to come to faith and to believe upon him for the first time, something wonderfully remarkable about that. You know what happens when we get baptized? Well, you've seen it as well as I do.

There's more than one thing happening. Not only do we believe in Jesus' death and believe in his resurrection, we confess our faith in his death and we confess our faith in his resurrection. But we go beyond that.

We also make a promise, a covenant to share in his death and to share in his resurrection because at that baptismal tank something happens where his story and our story become inseparable. They become intertwined. Our story is affected by his story.

And so as the disciples watch the death and resurrection of Jesus, all of a sudden their story looks vastly different in so many ways. They suddenly begin to realize what might come out of betrayal. There could be a resurrection on the other side.

What could come out of hypocrisy? The kind of resurrection that could come out of that. And the ways in which experiencing those things kills something in your heart, don't they? That God is a God who comes in a power of resurrection and says betrayal has hurt your heart. I'd like to resurrect those sides of your heart.

Hypocrisy has killed something in your heart. I'd like to resurrect that. Disappointment has killed some part of your hope where it's hard to hope again.

And there's a power of the resurrection that actually brings faith and expectation back to life again. So there's choices that they had to make and there's choices that we have to make. So you've been betrayed.

And because of that maybe part of us holds back and we say, do we really want to engage in a relationship again? The problem is, do you really want to be that kind of person who because something went wrong in a relationship, now you never want deep relationships again? You really want that? So you never know anybody beyond the superficial? I'm pretty open in relationships. And I made a decision. If someone does the wrong thing with what they see in me, I'm going to show them they're going to see it all.

They're going to see where I fail. They're going to see my mistakes. I'm going to let people close enough to see that stuff.

It's not mine but theirs. I will not stop doing that because if I do, I kill something in me. I actually like being transparent.

I actually like letting people close enough to see both sides. When I preached many, many years ago, this is what the Lord told me. He said, how come when you're preaching you tell faith stories but you only tell stories that came out really good? Stories where you come out sounding like the hero? Stories that came through? So from that point on, I made a point of more telling when I get it wrong than when I get it right.

Because if I only tell stories where I happen to get it right, so much of a congregation could sit back and go, well that's easy for him. I'd rather tell stories where I get it wrong. So some part of you goes, I'm not alone.

I'm not the only one. I've been betrayed. But there's some part of God that wants to work in us so that we love like we have never been betrayed.

And build relationships like we've never lost one. That's a resurrection following a death. To trust like we've never been misunderstood.

You really want to live a life where you never trust anybody again? Listen to 1 Corinthians 13. Read it like for the very first time. When I read that I'm like, Paul, haven't your trust ever been abused? You can hear him echo, of course.

But I choose to trust again. You really want to live a life where you never trust anybody? You want to call that community? Yeah, maybe you experienced a death there. Well then maybe it's time for a resurrection.

Time to to trust again. Let's talk about personal failure Hmm. It's not just personal failure.

You know what it is? It's when you fail in the same area repeatedly. Am I right? It's not just the one-offs that kill a guy. It's the one that doesn't seem to go away and gets you again and again that makes you think, what kind of person am I? That produces a death.

And yet there's a resurrection on the other side. Where we're going as a church there are some decisions that every one of us are going to need to make. It's the same decision that that early community made.

They made a decision, I was betrayed, but I will not stay there and I will not be held back by it. Now it's time for some of us to make that decision. That early community says, I saw hypocrisy, but it's not all hypocrisy.

I won't check out because if you do, then guess what? You become the next hypocrite. I'll model something more beautiful and more sincere than I've ever seen before. And so they didn't check out.

And so we see them in the upper room. They are not cynical. They are not skeptical.

They are beautiful and innocent and prayerful. And so maybe some of us have to make those decisions. You've seen things you wished you wouldn't have seen.

You've been misunderstood. None of us want to be misunderstood. If you had asked my wife particularly a couple of years ago, what are Todd's pains? I would think she'd probably put number one on the list.

He hates being misunderstood. So because I have to clarify with her and clarify, I just want you to know why I'm saying this. I want you to think of God's people up until the ministry of Jesus.

What do they call the period between the Old Testament and the New Testament? You know what it's called? It's called the 400 silent years. And it's called that way because for 400 years there hadn't been a prophet in the land for 400 years. So you try to go a whole lot of years.

You haven't heard the voice of the Lord to you. All of a sudden Jesus comes on the scene. The very word of God, incarnate, comes on the scene.

All you have to do is everything he says is prophecy. Everything he says is the word of the Lord. But if you'd been too hurt by the silent years, part of you has checked out and you've told yourself I'll never hear the word of God.

Everybody else around me will, but I won't. So even when the word of God does return to the land, it's already said I'm not the kind of person this will happen to. And so even when it increases, you won't experience it.

So same thing, when I went through a period, the new people won't know my story, but I went through a period where God took me through 12 years to the day, a dark night of the soul where he introduced me to an internal form of suffering. The problem is 12 years overlapped a great move of the spirit that was happening in Canada in the 1990s. And so I'm here with people all, I was with preaching revival meetings across the country.

And I'm with people that are experiencing a dramatic move of God and experiencing the glorious presence of God. And guess what I feel on the inside? Nothing. So you go through all kinds of emotions.

You could think something must be wrong with me, or you could think something must be wrong with them. They're putting this on and there's some pain inside. Why are all this happening? And why am I not happening here? And it would have just been so easy to check out and never go to another one of those meetings.

Because I didn't actually feel it when I was, I can feel it sharply. When you feel everybody else around you is experiencing something and I'm the guy that's not and I happen to be the preacher. So the renewal people were absolutely wonderful because everybody wanted to pray me out of my wilderness.

You'd almost see it. They're like, I'll be the guy to get taught out of his wilderness. Watch this.

But I also realized my response to all those earnest people and to all those earnest prayers was very important because part of me could have just closed off and said it won't happen. For 12 years it hasn't happened. Could have just closed off and shut down.

But I realized if I do that, who's going to be the loser? Only me. And so I disciplined myself every single time they prayed for me. Literally hundreds of people I said, Lord, maybe today's the day.

Maybe this is the person. Maybe this is your moment. And I disciplined myself every single time.

And I said, maybe something's happening that I don't feel. And so I would just, by faith, drink it in. And I don't know, maybe down there something is happening or it's stirring it up.

But I just put my faith out there every time because the moment I stopped putting my faith out there is the time where I'm in deep trouble because good things happen to those who believe. So every time I did that and I concentrated when I was in these settings of saying, Lord, whatever season they're in it looks kind of fun but I blessed them in their season. Incredible stories and God encounters and I just blessed it.

But I also disciplined myself to say, I believe that my season is just as much ordained of God as theirs. That in God's economy He doesn't lift one or rate one above the other. That was hard to do in that moment because I felt pretty lowly.

But I had to believe I was in the season of God's making and He will take me out of it in His time. So I blessed their season and I blessed mine. And still hundreds of days, hundreds of people to keep believing even though it seemed to me there was every reason not to.

Until the clock struck and my 12 year period came to an end. Jesus spoke to me and said, you want to walk the path of the original 12 disciples? I'll give you 12 years to die for it. And then life came.

And the presence of the Lord descended on me. I could hardly walk straight for two years. And then people would think to me, what is happening to that guy? Because I can't walk a straight line.

Because when the presence of the Lord comes out strong, it's like the spiritual gets turned up so much it feels like the physical world gets turned down and you're like, whoa, a little bit zoned out. But am I ever glad I didn't harden my heart? Am I ever glad I didn't say, not me. I'll stop believing.

If I'm glad I didn't say 12 years of pain, I'll never see anything better than pain. I had some choices to make. They're choices that resemble the choices this community makes.

They're choices that resemble ones that you've got to make. I think as we go further and deeper into the season, there's that God is stoking something inside of our hearts. It's called pure faith.

It's different than just human optimism. It's more than just cup half full. It's something that comes from heaven and becomes resident in your heart.

It's the ability to believe the promises of God and lay hold of them and to ignore things to the contrary. It's a gift of God. And He's wanting to increase our faith.

He's wanting for us to step out in ways that maybe we haven't for a while. And so I want to encourage you if you've got a physical infirmity and someone has prayed for you like they did me a thousand times, guess what? Get up to the altar and get them prayed for again. Well, what happens if my back doesn't feel better? It doesn't better.

Your heart will feel better. Your heart will feel better to flex a little faith. Exercise a little faith.

Get back into believing again. Been hurt through betrayal? Then guess what? This week, go phone up someone and make a new friend. Look at all the wonderful new people here today.

I wish our services were built different just so I could go not just greet them but spend time with them because there are some new friends here. Phone up someone, make a new friend. I lost my old friend.

Go make a new one. Well, I saw hypocrisy. Well, then go do something unhypercritical.

Go do something sincere. Blindingly sincere. Maybe you're thinking Todd, my story is like yours.

You talk about welcoming the presence of the Lord. I haven't felt the presence of the Lord for three years. Oh, don't worry.

I know exactly what that's like. Then pray again. You know why we believe? We're believers.

That's why we're called believers because the one thing we're called to do well in life is believe. Believe again. You can have a move of God in a situation and it could touch only a handful of people because if you already checked out, it'll go right past you like a freight train.

So we read the stories of Jesus walking through towns, healing people. The tough side of the story is all the people that didn't reach out and touch the hand of his garment went and healed and walked right past their doorstep. Remember the woman of a flow of blood? How long? Twelve years.

I went through a little twelve years. Some of you may go through something that is just a metaphor. It won't last that long, I hope.

God forbid. Twelve years and she's still reaching. She's still pushing.

She's still believing. No wonder Jesus said, Oh, I've never seen such great faith like this in all of Israel. I've never seen faith like this.

That after twelve years, after twelve years, you're still believing like it's the very first time. When Cecilia was a little girl, maybe three, four years of age, just loved praying with her before bed. Every night.

And there was something in her tone that night that I just felt led to tell her something. I said to her, Cecilia, do you know that every prayer you ever pray is heard by God? And she raised one eyebrow. Papa, really? Now, why did she do that? Because even at three or four, there's a little disappointment there.

She raised an eyebrow. Really? I said, yeah. Every prayer you ever pray, God will hear.

And he'll either say, Yes, Cecilia. I would love to do that for you. Or he'll say, Cecilia, I can't.

It would be harmful if I did that for you, but thanks for asking. Or he'll say, Cecilia, that's a beautiful prayer. It's coming.

A little bit, a little wait, and then it's coming. Every single prayer you pray, he'll either say yes, no, or later. And my daughter knew that I wasn't trivializing it.

Because guess what? She was okay with a yes. She was okay with a no. Even at three or four years of age, she understood that through her parents that everything can't be a yes.

And it's not because you don't love her. And she also understood already at that young age sometimes the benefits of waiting for beautiful gifts. They call it Christmas Eve.

The only thing that she didn't want is to think that her prayers were falling on deaf ears. And they weren't being listened to. Every prayer you have ever prayed has been listened to intimately.

For some of it was a yes. For some of it was a sorry dear. And for some of it was it's coming.

So what happens if we're entering a season where the things that are coming are nearly here? John Murdoch, you got to hear more of his story recently. His story, we were ministering in Scotland. John Murdoch was my pastor.

And God has taken him through a real broken time. Even here, I was supposed to be preparing for my sermon here last night. The whole time, God just keeps speaking to me about John Murdoch.

Texting him, promises, promises, promises. Be nice to get onto my sermon, Lord, promises, promises. And he is, literally he is on the precipice.

Imagine if six months ago you had checked out. Imagine six months, imagine three months ago you had just said, enough. I've never seen him happier.

I've never seen him healthier. He's on the verge of everything God has ever stole him coming to pass. But if two, three months ago he had just said, that's it.

I'll be present, but I'll be absent. So beloved, this is not a season to be clinging to yesterday's pains. And there are some choices.

This is not a season to be paralyzed by yesterday's betrayals. This is a season to get those fixed and over with. This is not a season to be held back by yesterday's disappointments.

I know, you may, some part of you wants to pull back into that and say, I'm not willing to give up that disappointment. The Bible says this, today if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart. So that part that wants to just, like this, be very careful.

It only takes a second to make that decision and it can take years to reverse it. I encourage you, beloved, choose well. Choose well.

I want to have a heart, he's doing a lot in this, of heart. I want to have a heart that's so open, so open to people around me. I want to have less walls up than I've ever had.

I want to have no walls up. And to him, I want to be so open hearted, so we're going to take a time to pray. Ask Chad to share something in his heart and as he does, let's prepare, let's prepare ourselves to ask the Lord, Lord, what do you got for me? Let's ask him right now.

Lord, where am I holding back? Where is the past paralyzing my present? Let's pray, folks. Because in order for us to go into the next stages of God's increasing presence amongst us, it's going to take a greater openness. Some things, in order to sometimes to run forward, there's some weight that we've got to let go of.

He's increasing amongst us. He's manifesting his presence. You've seen it.

Remember Ezekiel, he was brought to a river. The Lord beckoned him into the river. So he went into his ankle depth.

Some of you, you made great decisions in the last months walking into the river. Flow of God's Spirit. But for some of you, you're saying, OK, it's time to take the next step now.

Time to come to your knees where you can start to feel a little, a little bit of the current. When you're only up to an ankle depth, you can feel the refreshing of God, but you can't feel its strength. By the time you even start to get to your knees or up to your hips, you can feel the strength, the current.

In other words, you're starting to get to the place where you can relinquish control and fear. And then when he starts to bring you deeper, in order to do that, you actually got to get rid of, you can't go deep water with weights on your shoulders. And eventually, he invited that prophet out to where the water was now carrying him.

Light, there's a lightness. The water's doing all the work. Taking him downstream.

So there's no resistance. There's no reluctance. There's no fighting back.

Father, we ask for the river of your spirit to flow from your throne, to flow through our hearts and through our midst this morning. And we choose to go deeper and to relinquish things that will allow us to go further. Speak to us, oh Father.

Speak to us, loving Father. Abba, whatever you ask of us, you've got it, because you're our Father. Hallelujah.

Open our hearts to love again. Open our hearts to worship with abandonment. To love without reticence.

To trust without conditions. To believe, to believe. Hallelujah.

Speak to us. Listen, let him speak to your heart. My heart is yours.

You won't relent until you have it all. My heart is yours. And until you have it all, my heart is yours.

You won't relent until you have it all. My heart is yours. As a seal upon my heart.

As a seal upon my heart. For there is none that is as strong as death. Jealousy demanding as a grave.

Many waters cannot quench this love. You won't relent until you have it all. My heart is yours.

You won't relent until you have it all. My heart is yours. Be the fire inside of me.

Come be the flame upon my heart. Come be the fire inside of me. Lord, to you and I alone.

Come be the fire inside of me. Come be the flame within my heart. Come be the fire inside of me.

To you and I alone. You won't relent until you have it all. My heart is yours.

You won't relent until you have it all. My heart is yours. Every part and all.

All consuming fire, have it all. Continue to pray. Sometimes in moments like this, beloved, there's some bad habits we have to shed.

We hear the words, you're going to let go of betrayal, and part of our heart says, no, you don't really know. Well, do you realize what you just did at that moment then? That's not interpreting our story in the light of the cross. Who said, father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Yes, you're right, that person might not know how much they hurt you. They may never know. But if you want to choose to hang on to that, it will not be without consequence.

Beloved, forgive. As Christ in his grace forgave you. There's some bad habits we've got to shed.

We don't even realize that we've been saying no in our heart, which means we're saying, I'd rather be, I'd rather live a life of fear than faith. Beloved, that's got consequences to saying that. But it's scary to give up fear.

Of course it is. That's why they call it fear. But if I want a heart that's free and not bound up, I know it's in every one of us.

I want the best that God wants to offer me, as long as there's certain things he doesn't touch. Why don't you just put it out there a little bit? Do something that looks a little reckless and say, you can touch those. You can touch those.

There's no, I'm not going to say no to you. Otherwise you can come in, you can hear the word of the Lord, you can go straight back out with the very burden you came in with. The word of the Lord didn't profit you any.

Remember what Jesus said? It's like seed. But if you're not careful, it just lays on the top of the ground and the ravens will pick it up, take it away. It doesn't produce any fruit.

So there's a, we break up the fallow ground. We make sure there's no hard, we open up the earth and let the seed of God's word go deep into our hearts where it can do some good. When we make choices, we're opening up our hearts.

Even if you just prayed a prayer that said, I want your closeness, your presence. I want you to be with me. I can't afford closed heartedness.

I can't afford closed heartedness. I can't afford finger pointing. I can't afford just to always point out the people that hurt me.

Steve is one of our elders. Ask him to bring a word to us. So I just wanted to share a picture that God gave to me during the worship earlier.

For those of you that are new, I guess that probably needs a little bit of explanation. When I pray, and particularly seems to happen in church and particularly during worship, sometimes God just puts this picture in my head. I'm not a very, I'm not a dreamer.

I don't dream much. I don't think in pictures. And so this is sort of against my sort of nature somewhat.

But the pictures that I get are really vivid and sometimes quite bizarre. But then as I pray it through, God reveals the meaning to me. And I feel that often these pictures are things that I need to share with the body here.

And it's not something I feel particularly comfortable doing. I sat in my seat during the sermon with my heart thumping and I don't want to be up here. But what I hope is that for those of you who do think in pictures and for others too, that it will help to sort of get it deeper into your heart or maybe make it a bit more memorable.

And when I got this picture in the worship, I thought, well, it's Lent. Todd's going to be preaching on giving things up and that type of stuff. So this picture's not relevant.

But as Todd spoke, I just knew that this is something that I had to share. So this is a bizarre picture. It was a picture of a lump of cheese, that sort of bright orange cheddar cheese.

And it looked like it had more food coloring than cheese in it. And that cheese was then grated in one of those sort of silver box graters on the large whole side, so shredded into strips. And I got the feeling that that was a painful process.

Cheese doesn't have much feeling. But this felt like a painful process. And then that cheese that was grated was then intricately woven together and was made into a beautiful, tasty-looking cheese board full of all sorts of different types of cheeses and crackers and grapes and everything else that you'd get in a nice restaurant.

As I prayed about that, I felt that God was saying that some of you have been through that grating process, that painful process, but that God's been doing the grating and that He's also going to be doing the weaving and the transforming. And we have not just a restorative Heavenly Father, but a transformative one. So He wants to transform you like He did with the disciples as they went through their rough period, like they did with Todd as he went through his wilderness, and like He has with lots of you, and to weave you into something much more appealing, much more attractive and rewarding.

So I believe that that's where God is taking a number of us in our congregation. So I just wanted to share that with you. So just close your eyes for a sec.

I'll tell you where the area that is where God is working most deeply in your life. It's the person or situation that is most grating on you. The person, thing, situation that's most grating on you, God is in that.

I'd be doing so much better in the Lord if it wasn't for that person. Oh no, that's not true. That's the very situation.

If you handle it rightly, we'll bring you into intimacy with God. What in life most grates upon you, let Him in there. It could be a memory.

There's a reason it's coming up right now. It's the Lord's way of saying that actually has affected you more than you know. It's His way of saying you've never been quite the same since then.

Part of you is guarded since then. And you've been preoccupied with your rightness. So preoccupied you've ended up in the wrong.

Let Him change that situation. It doesn't matter who's right or wrong. It matters at one level.

The question is if that person never came and said, I'm sorry. If they never said I was in the wrong, could you give it to the Father and leave it with Him and not have your life defined by that offense any longer? Just think of the amount of time you worry about it. Think about it.

All that time could be spent in worship. It could be spent loving in love instead of worry. Oh, when I think of the areas that I obsess, the things I obsess, and as I think about them a lot, they're telling me something.

Now you're engaging with the real issues and the presence of the Lord is manifesting. Where do you suffer from acute anxiety? Go for that area. What's the thing that keeps you up at night? Now His sweet presence is coming.

It's easy to offer God every area except for the one He's asking for. It's the one right under your nose. Because we've made agreement with it.

It's like an old friend. It doesn't even seem like a foreigner anymore. When's the watershed moment where the Lord wants to say, you've never been quite yourself since that.

Or at least a part of your heart was lost there. Forfeited. He's not speaking in a condemning tone.

He's speaking like a loving saying. That part of you that would really go for it, it's never been quite the same since that experience. That part of you that would believe for the impossible, there's a part of you that God misses.

It was way more special than you realized. He actually liked that about you. It was actually, it was you, it was the real you.

It just feels like it's buried under a heap of rubble. If you'll let Him, He'll clean that, He'll move it. He'll return that part of your heart to you.

Just ask Him, return the parts of my heart that I've lost. The parts of my heart I've closed, the parts I've forfeited, the parts of me that I've forfeited. Restore them.

And help me to be a restorer of the people around me. I don't want to hold people around me in their past, hold them in their mistakes, Simon. I want to be a restorer of the people around me.

Come on, let's find you again. Find you again. Worship like you were intended.

Like you were made to. With abandonment. To love with abandonment.

If you'd like to just, you could come to, just come stand at the front, instead of going to prayer teams. If you'd like to just come stand at the front as your way of saying, Oh Lord, speaking to me. And people will come alongside, discreetly, support you and pray for you.

Just come for it now. Oh.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/28/SID28747.mp3>

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