

1 John 4:13-17

“Repainting the Wall”

I want to begin today with the stories of two different young men. Many of you may recognize the first mystery person before I reach the end. But we’re looking at their stories as we think about how lives are shaped by our individual experiences. And we’re asking whether our future is defined by our past?

He began his life with all the classic handicaps and disadvantages. His mother was a powerfully built, dominating woman who found it difficult to love anyone. She had been married three times and her second husband had divorced her because of violence in the home. The father of the child I’m describing was her third husband, and had died of a heart attack a few months before the child’s birth. As a consequence, the mother had to work long hours from his earliest days. She gave him no affection, no love, no discipline, and no training during those early years.

cassette by Ravi Zacharias, *Divided Heart; Divided Home*

Other children had little to do with him, so he was alone most of the time. He was absolutely rejected from his earliest childhood. He was ugly and poor, untrained and unlovable. When he was 13 years old, the school psychologist commented that he probably didn’t even know the meaning of the word *love*. During adolescence the girls wouldn’t have anything to do with him and he fought constantly with the boys. Despite a high IQ he failed academically, and finally dropped out during his third year of high school.

He thought he might find new acceptance in the marines corps, for they reportedly “built men”, and he wanted to be one! But his problems went with him. The other marines laughed at him and ridiculed him. He fought back; resisted authority; was court-martialed; and thrown out of the marines with an undesirable discharge.

So there he was, a young punk in his early 20’s, absolutely friendless and ship-wrecked. He was a small, scrawny lad and had an adolescent squeak in his voice. He was balding, had no talent, no skill, no sense of worthiness. He didn’t even have a driver’s license.

Once again he thought he could run from his problems so he went to a foreign country to live. He was rejected there, too, for nothing had really changed. While there he married a girl who herself had been an illegitimate child, and brought her back to America to live with him.

Soon she began to develop the same contempt for him that everyone else displayed. She bore him two children, but he never enjoyed the respect and status a father should have.

His marriage began to crumble. His wife demanded more and more things he couldn’t provide. And instead of being his ally against the bitter world as he hoped she would become, she became his most vicious opponent! Finally she forced him to leave and he tried to make it on his own and was dreadfully lonely. After days of solitude he went home and literally begged her on his knees to take him back.

She belittled his feeble attempts to supply his family’s needs and ridiculed his failure. On one occasion she made fun of his sexual impotency in front of a friend at which point he fell on his knees and wept bitterly as the greater darkness of his private nightmare engulfed him.

Finally, in silence, he pleaded no more. No one had ever wanted him. He was perhaps the most rejected man of our time.

The next day he was a strangely different man. He arose, went to the garage, took down a rifle he had hidden there and carried it to his newly acquired job at a book storage building, and from a window on the third floor of that building shortly after noon, November 22, 1963 he sent two shells crashing into the head of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

Some psychologists would review the life of Lee Oswald and argue he didn’t have a

chance! And certainly the odds *were* stacked against him. It's a pitiful story of a life lost in loneliness and failure.

But now I turn to Cornelius. His story appeared in the Chicago Tribune 12 years ago, (*November 16, 1999*). Parts of the story could make you sick.

It began on a hot August day in 1987, paramedics and Chicago police arrived at an apartment where a 4-year-old boy was said to be unconscious.

There they found Lattie McGee. With breaking voice Officer Roberto Garay said, "I've never seen anything like it in my life... There were horrible burns on his ankles. It didn't make sense. Later we found out the burns were rope burns from when they would hang him upside down in the closet." ["We lifted his shirt up, and his chest... it was totally raw. All of the flesh."]

The 4-year-old child had been tortured constantly over the summer by his mother and her boyfriend. Because Lattie had a high-pitched voice, Campbell, the mother's boyfriend, accused him of being a sissy. Four years old. He beat Lattie with fists and sticks, he burned him with cigarettes and a clothing iron, he repeatedly stuck him with sewing needles, and dunked him in scalding water.

On the night before Lattie died he had pneumonia, a broken collar bone and broken pelvis, and was complaining that he couldn't swallow. The torture didn't stop.

In the morning the mother watched "The Incredible Hulk" on television and didn't check on her son in the closet. After another beating from her boyfriend Lattie collapsed and died.

The Assistant State's Attorney prosecuted the mother and her boyfriend. "This is the worst case imaginable," the Prosecutor said at the time. "There's a special place in hell for them."

The key witness was only 8 years old during the trial in 1990. He was Lattie's brother, Cornelius. Cornelius underwent some of the same torture Lattie did, but somehow he survived.

With enormous courage, he took the witness stand at the Cook County Criminal Courts building, and - facing down the killers - he told what had happened.

Cornelius had been 6 that terrible summer in 1987, and hadn't been able to stop the torture and murdering of his little brother. Because of his bravery in court, the truth came out. The murderers were sentenced to life in prison.

A Chicago writer wrote about the trial in his column. And it was in November eleven years later the writer heard from Cornelius again. He wrote, "I had worried about what would come next, as did everyone who knew him. If ever there was a child who could be excused for failing in life, it was Cornelius. After what he had been through, after what he had seen and endured."

Even after the trial was over, Cornelius went through some very hard times. He ended up having to leave the next two families with whom he lived.

Now, all these years later, here was this telephone call, from Cornelius Abraham. He was being honored. He had graduated from high school where that spring his fellow students elected him prom king - and he had applied to and been accepted at Northern Illinois University where he planned to study computer sciences.

Much of his healing had come with the help of the YMCA Network of Greater Chicago. That organization was starting a new award to be given annually to a child whose determination and drive to overcome incredible obstacles is especially inspiring. The award, the organization had decided, would be called the Cornelius S. Abraham Award. The first recipient would be Cornelius.

He went to college, set career goals, and was moving on with his life. Nothing is ever

guaranteed to anyone – but against every odd, he was making it!

Many psychologists believe our lives are shaped by the personal experiences that impact our “self.”

Bonnie Crandall from Lexington, KY uses the illustration of a blank wall; each child is a blank wall on which others write, helping to compose the story of self-worth and esteem. How do you *feel* about yourself? Typically, we feel about ourselves how others have told us how we ought to feel.

The important people in your life have a chance to write graffiti on your wall. Some of the significant people in your life may have said you’re lazy, you’re stupid, you’re not important, you’re not valuable, you’re junk! We give incredible power to people expressing awful things about who we are! And maybe they didn’t say it with words, but you felt it in the way they treated you; or the way they mistreated you!

We don’t always like it, but we replay these messages, reviewing all the “junk,” all the recordings, people have painted onto the canvass.

As a child with a blank slate, you’re powerless over the graffiti on your wall. But you live with the message from the village of thoughts and words and attitudes expressed to you – about you – through the years. Look at what that could’ve meant to someone like Lee Harvey Oswald!

But let’s think about this theologically; from a biblical standpoint today.

When Jesus was asked what’s the most important thing we should do with our lives, He answered, “**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’**” (Matthew 22:37-38)

Now in which order are we to love – first, second, and third? Love God, love your neighbor and then love yourself?

No! Typically, that’s the way we hear this command, but let’s reorder this: Love God. Love yourself. And love your neighbor. If you are to love your neighbor well, if you are to love your neighbor as yourself, you have to have a healthy love for your self before you can love your neighbor!

Because of the graffiti on your wall not everyone loves their “self” very well. These same people have no trouble believing God loves everyone! They just don’t believe God’s love applies to them! It’s written all over their wall: “Yes, God loves everybody! But He won’t love me.”

“If other people only knew me better, they’d know I’m a loser. I’m worthless!”

But you know, God is calling you to a new kind of love!

The Bible rejects this idea that our lives are unchangeable and irreversible. Because of the power of God and the love God has for you – every person has available to him or her the grace to rise out of the ashes from a horrible past. It’s incredible that Cornelius Abraham not only survived – but thrived!

The Bible tells us about a new artist, for God “has written His name on your heart!”

It’s time for a change in the way we love and the way we feel about ourselves.

Now some people believe that “change” is hard, or change is bad, “I can’t change!” But the story of Cornelius ought to inspire you! The Bible is all about change. Change is God design!

- Philippians 4:13 says: **I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.**
 - It may sound impossible, but again, the Bible says: **Trust in the Lord; lean not to your own understanding.** Proverbs 3:5
 - Jesus confirmed: **With God, all things are possible.** Matthew 19:26
- God wants us to take responsibility for our “wall.” We’re not to let the ugly graffiti of the

past hurt us anymore. Design a person you can grow into; a person that delights your heart and pleases God! The Bible teaches us to put away “childish ways.” And this doesn’t refer to growing up and growing older, but growing mature with our choices. Grow up to be responsible for who you are now, who you are becoming, and who you want to be!

It’s time to clean the graffiti from your wall! Reject the lies! Overlook the hurt! Move to forgive! Choose to live in a way that you love yourself and recognize the self that God loves!

READING 1 John 4:13-17

¹³ By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent His Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶ So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as He is, so are we in this world.

The Bible describes a special connection to God through His Spirit given to us! In a sense we have new DNA! We might even say we have power-packed protein that connects us to Jesus Christ! I have to tell you about laminins. (Have you heard of laminins?) Something so tiny, but a major protein in virtually every tissue of the human body. Laminins are the vital “stuff” that produces adhesion between cells. It’s the laminins that holds everything together, that “connects” us together, inside! It’s like the rebar, the steel in the concrete that keeps everything put together. You don’t have to know a lot about science to get this!

The Bible says **By this we know that we *abide* in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.** Now we know, on a micro-biological scale, God will hold you together with this protein molecule called laminin.

You have to see laminin in order to appreciate what this means. Each protein has a cell structure; you’ve seen the models from your science classes: how the molecules are connected to one another. And here’s the cell structure of laminin, the protein that connects us together! [a “Google Image” search will be helpful here: in the shape of a cross!] When the Bible says “we abide in Him, and He in us...” the Bible may be revealing a deeper secret than we ever realized!

[see also the Electron-microscopic image of an actual laminin molecule. The stuff that holds our body together is in the shape of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!]

The Bible says: **If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ...** 2 Corinthians 5:17-18

In Psalms, we are reminded: You are “fearfully and wonderfully made!” (Psalm 139:14)

You worship a God who knows all about you and loves you so deeply, He’s a part of who you are in the most detailed way. Do you know you can trust Him to love you, to heal you, to change your heart and mind so that you are not broken by the graffiti of the past. He’s painting a new portrait for you from the inside, out!

Will you let Him? Will you let Him conquer the memories, the reminders of things that have shamed you and things that have shaped you so that you can become the bold, beautiful believer He designed you to be?

You can – if you’ll follow Him. And God may ask you to forgive those people from the past who have left awful junk on your wall. But forgiveness is necessary so that *you* are free from the shadows they cast across your life, and you can move on to be the person set free in the

power of God's love! This freedom from the past is possible because God cares for every fibre of your being!

Are you ready for that kind of healing? The journey to healing can begin today! Beyond the simple song we sing we want to encourage you to find a path to healing! If you're looking for a guide ...to help you overcome the past seek out the help of your pastor!