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Presentation Transcript
Mental Health and the Bible – Traumatic Grief - Pentecost
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June 22, 2017

Well, I know this is going to come as a big surprise to you, but today's presentation is for Pentecost – you know, the day on which God started the New Testament church – right? – a day to consider what it means to be in the body of Christ and to consider the people of God. Maybe that's not a usual theme, but the church is made up of people, isn't it?

I wanted to read you a scripture – it's in Philippians 4:11 – about one of those people. This is the apostle Paul talking. And here's a man that was blinded by God on his way to persecute Christians on Damascus Road. He suddenly did a one-eighty in his life. He probably highly esteemed being one of the most educated Jews in the world. He was part of the Sanhedrin at one time – a true scholar in every sense of the word. After he was blinded, he threw all of that away and did whatever God told him to do. He faced wild beasts at Ephesus, he told us. He was pressed out of measure, despairing even of life itself, he said. And yet, he said that God sustained him. So, here he's talking to the Philippians, and he says:

Philippians 4:11 – *Not that I'm speaking of being in need, for I have learned that in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I've learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.*

This guy knows how to talk about being low – right? – and being high. He went through *so* much because of the calling that God gave him. So he has the right to talk to us about how to do that, I think. He talks, too, about going forward. He said, "I'm least of all the ministers because I persecuted the church." And he said, "Nevertheless, forgetting those things which are behind, I press toward the mark of the high calling of Jesus Christ." So he knew how to let go of the sins that he'd committed and to go forward. He didn't allow feeling guilty and bad about himself to hold himself back from doing what God wanted him to do.

Do you think he ever got depressed? He said he was pressed out of measure, despairing even of life itself. He suffered a lot of grief in his life. A lot of the people that he loved and pastored – started on their Christian walk – forsook the faith while he was alive. Others were killed by the Romans. So he had a rough life – all because he wanted to be in God’s Kingdom and be with God.

And this is the thing I always come back to. It’s really nice to talk about the church and how we all have the Holy Spirit, and you know, all that kind of thing, but what part are *we* to do when we deal with losses, and when we deal with trials and problems? I mean, until we can talk about that stuff, the rubber hasn’t really hit the road yet. So, I’m going to do that a little bit today.

I tell people in our community about resolving grief and trauma by telling them a story. And I thought I might tell that story to you today, because you’re people that suffer grief and trauma, just like everybody else. Right? And that is stuff that holds people back from going forward. So here’s what I tell them:

Every night – roughly ninety minutes after we go to sleep – our eyes begin to go back and forth under our closed lids. We call that REM sleep. It stands for *rapid eye movement*. Right? Even animals do it. It’s not just a human thing. God built it into mammals and humans. Okay? I don’t know about insects and other stuff, but I do know that it happens to dogs. You may have seen a dog in REM sleep. If we happen to wake up during this time in sleep, we might catch a fleeting glimpse of some non-sensical or mysterious images – hardly ever words. There’s never a story with it – no beginning, middle and end. Such a curious thing! Why did God build into people? You know, for thousands of years, nobody knew why that was going on.

But then, brain research happened, and they started to watch the human brain while it was in REM. They could see where the activity was in the brain. And they saw memory networks in the right brain – that’s the side...that’s the “big picture” part of our brain that looks after us and keeps us safe, and does relationship, and kind of has an overarching awareness. They saw memory networks in the right brain down in the limbic system, where the emotions are created to begin with, being rewritten, or moved over, to left side. They’d see it really bright here, and then this would start getting brighter, and then this would get dimmer, and then all the activity was in the left cortex. Why? What was the purpose of that?

Well, have you ever gone to sleep angry about something, and in the morning when you wake up, you’re not as upset, even though nothing has changed about the situation? We say, “Well, a good night’s sleep...” Well, it turns out that that business of moving...when your brain is stimulated – left, right, left, right, left right – the stuff gets rewritten over to the left side. And that memory never should have been left in your amygdala on the right side, because that’s not what the amygdala is for. It’s for *creating* memory, not storing it. So, it moves it over, where it should have been to begin with. So it rewrites the memory. It’s now in a different form that it was when

it was created. And they're pretty sure REM causes this to happen. Many brain researchers now call REM housekeeping for the brain.

Most of the time, when something bad happens to us – something we don't like – we kick the refrigerator, we tell our mate about it, we grind it over a few dozen times, maybe we have a dream about it, but eventually, it gets put in another category that actually helps us. You know, never buy a car from him again, never whatever..., or never say that to somebody – if it's something we did that we're upset with. And so we all have the ability to process stuff that happens to us that we don't like and that we're emotional about, but eventually, it just gets put in the memory bank and it becomes food. It's helpful to us, because it's part of our experience and we want to keep doing that or not doing it, depending on what it was. So it's digested, you could say – processed. So that's what it means to process something that's upsetting. Okay? And we're all quite capable of doing that most of the time.

So, this bit about moving memory from side to side – that the brain researchers saw – has led us to an understanding of what happens in our brain when we're traumatized. Daniel Siegel – a highly regarded brain researcher out of UCLA – I actually heard him say this in person four years ago at the annual EMDR conference – that trauma is a disconnect between the left and the right side of the brain. It's a disconnect. And here's what the brain research indicates. When an event occurs that's overwhelming, and when it overwhelms a person's ability to cope with it.... You know, you and I...we've had lots of stuff happen to us, and we've had people tell us a lot of stuff that we didn't like to hear, and we're fully capable of saying, "Yeah, well, that's what *you* think. Why don't you just buzz off?" And we don't take it all seriously. But, if you yell at a baby, they don't know what to do with that. They don't have the resources to deal with that. Right? So, trauma can be something that you and I could handle with no problem, but could be traumatic to a baby. And something that might be traumatic to one of you might not be traumatic to another. So it's all about how we take what happens. Okay?

When a person is overwhelmed by what's going on, the part of the brain that stores memories starts to malfunction. I'll give you an example of how that might work. I had a client who was T-boned at an intersection in Albuquerque. (We don't have enough freeways, so we make really high speed limits on our residential streets, and people run red lights....) He got T-boned on his side of the car. He was in the hospital for weeks. When he got out and he tried to drive his car, he'd have panic – couldn't drive. And he also noticed, at random times when he was not expecting it, the Cadillac that ran into him would appear out of nowhere and stop just short of impact – like it was real all over again. Now there's a memory with no beginning, a middle, but no end. That was memory that was stored improperly. Right? And it comes up when he's not thinking about it. Most of the time we try to think of stuff from the past – stories and what not – and we pull it up, but this was just coming out of nowhere at him, while he was watching TV or in his cubicle at work. And he'd have a panic attack because of that. What's that? That's called a *flashback* – right? – reliving a portion of an incident – so clearly some evidence that some memory wasn't stored properly.

So that alone should prove what I'm telling you about how the brain works. And that flashback thing, that's one of the seventeen symptoms of PTSD. When people are having flashbacks about stuff from the past, that means that they were in a state of overwhelm when that event occurred and it wasn't stored properly.

But that's not the worst of it. The worst of it is that the memory storage organ – the hippocampus – malfunctions in another way when a person is overwhelmed. It leaves some of the memory where it was created – in the amygdala on the right side – just like we were talking about earlier. That's what the brain researchers noticed first about difficult events. It leaves it in the amygdala and that's not where memory is supposed to be stored.

I work with people that have been traumatized – like when they were five years old – and when they start talking about it while they're doing EMDR, it sounds like the age they were when it happened. So it's been sitting there...if you're 40 and it happened when you were 5, it's been sitting there for 35 years unchanged. It's just amazing to me how that works. And it doesn't seem that talking about it helps any. And that's one reason why so many people think, if you've got PTSD, you can never get over it. But actually, God has built into the human brain a process – a capability – of healing itself from that stuff. And we've just recently discovered at least how to use it when people are awake. And that's why Daniel Siegel said, "PTSD is caused by an unintegrated brain – the left and the right sides not functioning together – with regard to traumatic memory, stored during a traumatic event."

So what's bad about that? Well, you don't ever really get over it if it's stuck. There's something else, though, that's even, maybe, worse than that. The human brain is always asking the question, "What's going to happen next?" You know, you're approaching an intersection, you've got a green light, but you look to the left and you look to the right, and you see a guy coming 50 mph, so you put on the brakes, because you know what's going to happen next if you don't. Right? So that's a good thing, right? Or, you're sitting in a restaurant, and you look across the restaurant, and there's this creepy old guy looking at you with one eyebrow cocked up. What's going to happen next?

So I learned this next part from another brain researcher, called Bruce Perry, in Austin, Texas. He's also a child advocate. He says the brain does this to help keep us safe so that we know what to take with us on a trip, so we know when to leave the house to get to work, and one of the things it does – to answer the question – is – and we're very seldom aware of this...this is an unconscious thing that happens in the mind – is, it starts to search our memory banks for similar experiences. And – this is really important – it always starts that search with earliest memory first. And that includes the memory that you can't remember, because you were too little. It's all there. It's just put in a way that we can't access it, but that memory search does. Okay?

When we have a lot of memory stored in our right-side amygdala – that’s not processed – sometimes, the bad things from the past come into the present, contaminating our life and relationships. I’ll give you an example of how that works.

A forty-year-old man came to my office one day (I think I’ve told this story several times here, but I’ll tell it again, because it’s fun.) And he said he had recently begun having panic attacks at work when other people would argue with each other – *not* with him! – with each other. He would hear the voices start to rise and it would feel like the elephant would crawl on his chest and, he was having trouble breathing, and his heart would race, and he’d start sweating. He’d have to leave, because he was afraid he was going to have a full-blown panic attack. He couldn’t understand why this was happening. It just seemed to come out of nowhere. I asked him if he could remember times in his past when he felt the same way. And it turns out – just with that one question – that his two grandfathers – when he was very young – would get in physical fights. And he recounted an incident that took place at his house on Christmas morning. They were eating breakfast when it happened. And he recalled that his two grandpas got mad, squared off... bloody nose, cussing, kicked the Christmas tree over, dogs barking, kids screaming – total chaos. And he was terrified. To make matters worse, this happened a number of times through his early childhood.

Learning this, it was not hard for me to understand – thanks to Dr. Perry – that when people would begin arguing in his office and the voices would start to escalate, that it was triggering him right back to that. But he didn’t even know that was happening, because most of the time, when that triggering effect takes place, it doesn’t bring the whole load with it. It just brings the body sensations and the emotions from that time. So, can you imagine a five-year-old having a panic attack over something like that? Yah! And that’s what was coming into the present when he would hear them argue. “What’s going to happen next? Get a hit on Grandpa’s...” And all the feelings from the past would come into the present, making it nearly impossible for him to do his work.

Let’s think about grief for a minute. That’s something *all* humans have to go through. And, if you’re in the church...it tells us that Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Right? So, even He had that to deal with in His life. There is a psychologist named George Bonnano (I assume he’s Italian), at Columbia University, who’s done some amazing research on grief. His study concluded that most people can pass through the sadness and loss of a loved one in grief in six months to three years without therapy. And they said that therapy really isn’t needed in some cases. And in some cases, it can even make it longer – complicate the issue – because everybody does it their own way, at their own pace, and so they’re the experts on how they should grieve, really – not the therapist. So grieving is a completely natural process. But now Dr. Bonnano also tells us that the six month to three year thing goes right out the window if the loss was sudden, unexpected and/or violent. So the person that lost the loved one also was probably traumatized – overwhelmed their ability to deal with it.

I talked to a lady the other day whose...she said, "I can't feel anything. And I can't feel sorry for my son. And I can't feel sorry for my daughter." She said, "What's wrong?" "You have PTSD. Numbing is one the big symptoms of PTSD and your brain is doing that to you because it's too much to think about right now." So what's going to happen is, she's going to process the trauma of what happened, and then she's going to start feeling all of those feelings of loss and sadness for her children. But the trauma trumps the grieving. And that's what causes stuck grief or pathological grief. When people can't get over it, it's because it was traumatic for them when it happened. Now some people can work their way through it – even if it's somewhat traumatic – but there are a lot of people that get stuck in it. And that doesn't seem to improve without some kind of therapy, and usually talking about it doesn't work much.

I've worked with a number of parents who lost children in traumatic situations, and once they're treated and get past the trauma, they say, "Why is this hurting so much?" And before all they could talk about was the horror of what happened. Or they say, "I miss my child so much." Well, once the shock and the horror – the trauma part – is cleared away – the stuff's moved over where it should have been put – then they start to feel the natural feelings of loss and they can work their way through that on their own.

I was talking to a lady a few weeks ago who put off her husband's funeral service for three years. I worked with her for six months and then she finally got to where she was ready to do that. And she said, "You know, I'm always late on everything." And I said, "Well, Dr. Bonanno says six months to three years, so you're really right on time!" She laughed. But see, she *can* laugh now, because she's gotten past the traumatic part of it.

I have a friend who lost a son in teenage, due to an automobile accident. And he told me that for a year afterwards, every time he heard an ambulance he seized with terror, fearing that his daughter was now dead. I know a lady whose daughter hung herself with a decorative scarf from her bunk bed, and she told me later that she had no idea there were so many scarves in the world, because she would have panic every time she would see one. That unresolved traumatic memory would come flooding into the present, conveyed by the unconscious memory search that we all do thousands of times – maybe millions of times – every day of our lives.

So what can a person do about this terrible situation? Well, in 1985, a lady named Francine had just learned that she had cancer, and she was taking a walk to try and clear her head and figure out what her next step was, and she noticed that her eyes began to move back and forth while her eyes were open and while she was awake. And it somehow seemed to make her feel better. So, to make a long story short, she had her cancer treated, knocked out a doctorate in psychology and started an EMDR institute – EMDR standing for *eye movement desensitization and reprocessing*. Now, thirty years later, EMDR is the most widely researched therapy in the world. She knew it was so hokey-looking, nobody would believe that it worked, unless she could prove it. So they created a protocol so that the therapists would all do it the same way so the results could be measured – much easier. What I believe Francine Shapiro discovered was the mechanism that's a

part of everybody's mind, that can heal the mind of stuck traumatic memory. What it's doing is, it's stopping the dis-integration of brain function between the right side amygdala and the right side cortex by moving that material over – rewriting it, actually, in a healthy form. And I watch people do this...it's like your brain has to learn how to do it the first time you try it, because there will be a lot of hiccups and hitches, and people...their mind will go blank, or they'll be thinking about Blake's French fries, or they'll be thinking about counting the buzzing lights we're using, but then, after a while, it starts working. And it just goes through there and it goes to the things that need work, not the stuff that doesn't – you know, if it's not broke, don't fix it. It knows right where to go to fix the parts that need to be rewritten, and it does that, and then things are better.

I had a lady come in my office because she told her husband one morning that she was going to divorce him, and that afternoon she came home and found him dead in the bedroom. He'd shot himself in the head with a .45. So she came to see me. And after six sessions, she comes in for her seventh session, and I said, "How was your week?" And she said, "Pretty good! Pretty good." She said, "I think I'm going to move back into the house." I said, "Really?" She said, "Yeah, and I called my sister" – she'd been having a big feud with her sister for many years (I don't know how that got into the mix, but...) – but that was better, too. And she said, "And I called my husband's parents and forgave them for the way they treated me at the funeral." She said, "Am I over this?" I said, "Well, you'd know. I wouldn't." And she said, "I think I am." That happened, I think, a year prior, and in six weeks, she was back in the game.

The EMDR part can sound very technical, but another awesome brain researcher at UCLA, Allen Short, tells us that when there is a post-trauma stress in the picture, you can think about that as a right brain wound – that memory that's contained where it shouldn't be is like – to the brain – a wound. And he points out that a therapist can help heal that kind of wound by using his or her own right brain to help them heal that by just connecting with them. I've found this extremely important for my clients. They need to feel safe. They need to feel cared about and cared for, instead of judged or pressured – you know, "Can't you just get over it?" I mean, that's what a lot of people tell them. And the answer to that is, "No, they can't." It's stuck! So they need somebody that is going to be patient with them and help them get through it. Empathy really is the best balm. So that is the environment in which I do EMDR. And when I learned that, results improved dramatically.

The reason I'm mentioning this is, you might not know how to do EMDR on somebody, but you certainly could be empathic. Right? We can *all* do that. Being with someone emotionally through the aftermath is something loved ones *can* do, and that can be vitally helpful. But we have to be patient – like God has been with us – and we have to be respectful – like God is of us. In other words, we need to treat people in trouble the same way God has treated us when we've been in trouble.

I was looking at old sermon notes I gave on Pentecost, and I had one that I gave in 1996 (Was I coming here then? Just started, maybe.) and it was called *Ruth, Pentecost and You*. One of the statements I made in that sermon was that the whole story of Ruth is to help us realize what kind of people God is interested in – you know, people of character, people of compassion. Just read the story. It's great! The church is supposed to be a healing place for us. And, if we want to be a part of that, then we need to be empathic and caring about other people. Right? Patient, non-judgmental – just like we'd like to be treated – and, if we can do that, that is a *huge* helping thing.

I don't really think that EMDR really starts to happen very well for me until that foundation is built with people that come. They have to trust that they're going to get taken care of. Very important for us to think about what part we can play in being helpful to other people.

So that's the short story of all of it. While this was, originally, a presentation to the public with points for ways that Christians can overcome all sorts of losses and go forward to be unburdened servants, and we can all help each other to do that.