

**Cutting Edge:
What do you do with your pain?**

Pain: The Cutting Edge

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 44:16-34

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I love stories. I always have. I don't just read books or watch movies for entertainment. I love to learn about life, truth, transformation. This fall I have been teaching a class on Reel Spirituality—something I have wanted to do for a long time. And I have been reminded that every good story has a conflict that has to be resolved, and that conflict is usually a source of pain that drives the story forward. Characters get stuck in their pain, act out their pain, or resolve their pain in order to change and move forward in life-giving ways. You might say pain is the cutting edge in every story. It's true for life as well. Each of us has to answer this all important question: What do you do with your pain?

I recognize how God has used pain in my life to bring about growth and transformation, strengthen my faith and produce character. When my closest aunt died when I was eleven, I came to believe that God was real and that I wanted to know Him better. When my older brother died when I was twenty-one, I came to understand death is real, that I wanted to live for what matters, and that I was called to ministry. As I wrestled with infertility and worked through the process of adoption, I was confronted with the truth that I am not in control, but I know the one who is. I learned to surrender and to wait on God to do what only God can do. I don't have any major crisis in my life right now, but don't think for a minute that means I don't have any pain.

Pain is a reality of life whether we are dealing with grief, illness or injury, strained relationships, financial pressure, an uncertain future, or just the ups and downs of everyday life. It's not just the present circumstances at play, but how we are impacted emotionally and how we deal with that. You may be thinking this sermon is not for me because I don't have any pain, but hang in there. That's part of the problem. Our culture has conditioned us to believe we shouldn't have pain or at least we should distance ourselves from it. And because of painful past experiences, we may have put up walls to keep us from feeling more hurt. But that doesn't really work. Because as one teacher has said: Pain that is not transformed will be transmitted.

We have been looking at Joseph's story for some weeks now, and I wonder if we are so familiar with this story and how it ends that we gloss over the reality of all the pain. Think of the dysfunction of Jacob and his wives and all the pain they transmitted to each other and their children. When Joseph is finally born, he is the favored son. Imagine how hurt the other ten sons felt every time they looked at him and saw that special coat reminding them that their father loved Joseph more than them. We know they felt jealousy, anger, and even hatred. And when Joseph dreamed that they (the older brothers) would bow down to him (the youngest), they decide to get rid of the dream and the dreamer. Imagine believing that a

violent act of human trafficking against your own brother would solve your problems. As annoying as Joseph may have been as a teenager, he did not deserve that. But pain that is not transformed will be transmitted.

We have witnessed, in the past weeks, Joseph's life and leadership playing out in many different ways. He believed God was with him. He seems to have resolved his past pain, but a famine—a great source of pain—brings this family together again. I can't help but wonder if Joseph might be feeling unsafe as he did as a teenager when his brothers abused him so badly. The passage doesn't explain his feelings, but what we know is that he tests them because he has to know if they have changed or remained the same. Pete unpacked the first three tests last week.

But the last test comes as the brothers are loading up food to take home. Joseph asks his steward to put his silver cup in Benjamin's bag and then follow them and accuse the brothers of stealing it. They deny that they would do such a thing because they are honest men. But the cup is discovered in Benjamin's bag, and they are overcome with emotion. When they return, they bow before Joseph again. Here is where we pick up the story as Judah steps forward as the spokesman for all of the brothers.

And Judah said, "What can we say to my lord? What can we speak? How can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; here we are then, my lord's slaves, both we and also the one in whose possession the cup has been found." But he [Joseph] said, "Far be it from me that I should do so! Only the one in whose possession the cup was found shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father."

On the surface, Joseph's words appear magnanimous, but he knows that his brothers cannot return to their father without Benjamin. Once again, Joseph has tightened the screws. Have you noticed how the story centers on Benjamin, who never says or does anything? He is passive—almost like a pawn. In this test, Joseph has placed Benjamin in a relationship to his brothers that reflects what his relationship with them had once been. Will they act toward Benjamin as they once had toward him? Will they allow Benjamin to become a slave, while they save their own skins? Benjamin represents the cutting edge. The question being asked is "What will they do with Benjamin?" But the underlying question is "What will they do with their pain?" Pain that is not transformed will be transmitted.

Ownership
for guilt.



In this remarkable speech, Judah takes ownership of his pain and that of his brothers for the first time. In his mind, God is exposing their guilt. The irony of this is that Judah and his brothers are in fact innocent of the accusation. Their innocence mirrors

Joseph's innocence when he was wrongly thrown into the pit and sold into slavery. And the fate described—death for one and slavery for the rest—also mirrors Joseph's fate. In this confession, Judah acknowledges the weight of their guilt that they have been living with for so long. And in doing so, he begins to allow God to be a part of their story.

“Then Judah stepped up to him and said, ‘O my lord, let your servant please speak a word in my lord’s ears, and do not be angry with your servant; for you are like Pharaoh himself. My lord asked his servants, saying, ‘Have you a father or a brother?’ And we said to my lord, ‘We have a father, an old man, and a young brother, the child of his old age. His brother is dead; he alone is left of his mother’s children, and his father loves him.’ Then you said to your servants, ‘Bring him down to me, so that I may set my eyes on him.’ We said to my lord, ‘The boy cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.’ Then you said to your servants, ‘Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall see my face no more.’ When we went back to your servant my father we told him the words of my lord. And when our father said, ‘Go again, buy us a little food,’ we said, ‘We cannot go down. Only if our youngest brother goes with us, will we go down; for we cannot see the man’s face unless our youngest brother is with us.’ Then your servant my father said to us, ‘You know that my wife bore me two sons; one left me, and I said, surely he has been torn to pieces; and I have never seen him since. If you take this one also from me, and harm comes to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in sorrow to Sheol.’”

As Judah summarizes the story up to this point, we see a lot of emotion as he not only takes ownership for his guilt for past actions but also for the grief he and his brothers have brought on their father. Jacob is mentioned fourteen times, and his life is described as being filled with hardship and loss. Judah alludes to the violent death Joseph was believed to have suffered and refers to Jacob’s special love for Benjamin. If something happens to Benjamin, Jacob will die. This is a matter of life and death.

“Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy’s life, when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die; and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. For your servant became surety for the boy to my father, saying, ‘If I do not bring him back to you, then I will bear the blame in the sight of my father all my life.’ Now therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy; and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father.”

In recounting and summarizing what has happened, Judah also takes ownership for change. He acknowledges that the life of Jacob and Benjamin are bound together. Notice Judah talks about this reality without the jealousy, rage, and hatred he felt toward Joseph earlier in his life. He now speaks of his father's love for Benjamin calmly and with acceptance. But there is more. We see compassion and great concern for his father. He is unwilling to repeat the past patterns. He refuses to do something that will bring more grief into his father's life. What does Judah do with Benjamin? He asks to take Benjamin's place. What does Judah do with his pain? The one who made Joseph a slave now asks to be made the slave. Judah's pain has been transformed, and he is now free to be generous in a way he was not able to be long ago.

This great drama—this story—is so powerful because it reflects our story. The circumstances are different, of course, but the cutting edge is the same: What do you do with your pain?



One choice we have is to react. Emotions like disappointment, jealousy, and anger allow us to focus outward on others and their behavior. But blaming life, circumstances, and people doesn't help us move forward in our healing and transformation. Repeated dysfunctional

patterns in marriages, families, communities, and countries often continue because people are stuck in reacting to emotions and projecting them outward as a means of protection from more vulnerable emotions such as loneliness, grief, fear, guilt, shame, rejection, or panic. These emotions can feel utterly overwhelming. It feels much better to be angry at someone or at a situation than to reflect on why I am reacting the way I am.

This year my oldest son is in middle school, and he has to catch the earliest bus in Fairfax County. I have heard myself complain about this—a lot. It's not getting up early that bugs me. It's being responsible for getting someone else up early and out the door on time that bugs me. I find myself reacting a lot—getting frustrated, frenetic, controlling. It's easy to blame the school schedule or my son, but it's me. Underneath the reactions are my own inward anxieties, and I have to decide what I'm going to do with the pain. Renewing prayer is helping me a lot.

While we sometimes react, we can also repress our pain as an attempt to keep a lid on it. We may deny we have pain at all or perhaps minimize it by comparing it to the great suffering of others. It's true. All pain in the world is not equal. And while it's good to keep perspective, we still have

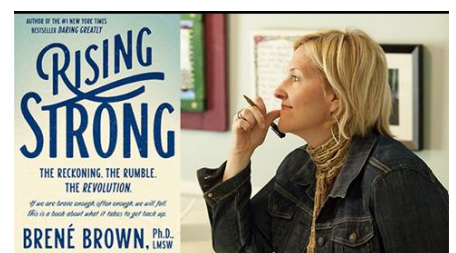
to answer the question: What will you do with your pain—whether it is big or small. Why? Pain that is not transformed will be transmitted.

I am guilty of repressing my pain, and for a long time I wasn't even conscious of what I was doing, but thankfully I have become aware of the negative patterns. When I am stressed, I sometimes mindlessly watch TV or graze for food, in an attempt to distract myself, disengage from difficult realities, or to feed my anxiety. But I can also become frenetic by over-analyzing situations or talking too much in an attempt to process what is troubling me. Understand that I'm sharing about myself only because I know you have ways of repressing your pain, too. I'm just trying to get the wheels turning for you.

The truth is, we all have adaptive patterns that are really an attempt to keep our pain at bay. Addictions such as overeating, drinking, shopping, working, or playing too much golf are ways of pushing down our more vulnerable emotions like anxiety, fear, bitterness, resentment, or shame by doing something that gives us pleasure. But pain that is not transformed robs us of the health, energy, vitality we were created by God to experience and keeps us from enjoying our relationship with God and with others.

But there is another way to answer the question “What will you do with your pain?” In summing up the story to this point, Judah is demonstrating that owning our pain is the cutting edge to beginning to rewrite the story of our lives and relationships. He is choosing to find a new resolution for the many conflicts and the depth of pain in this story.

As I was studying and preparing for this sermon this week, I recalled a presentation many of us heard at the Global Leadership Summit this past August. Brené Brown spoke on her new book, *Rising Strong: The Reckoning, The Rumble, The Revolution*. What she said connected with Judah's story and our story. She said we have to be willing to reckon with emotion and get curious about how we are feeling. Because when we deny the story of our emotions and pain, it defines us.



And, then, we have to rumble. That means we have to own our story and be willing to wrestle with what is both true and hard. We have to learn to be okay with discomfort and pain. Only when we own the story do we get to rewrite it. That is the cutting edge, the turning point, the twist in our story.

And only then will there be a revolution. This is her word for transformation. In a good story, conflict is meant to be resolved and pain is meant to be transformed. But we don't get to rewrite a story we don't own.

Judah's willingness to own his pain was the cutting edge that enabled his story and that of the family, and the entire nation of Israel to take another turn. The reconciliation we will see in the coming weeks would not have been possible if Judah did not take ownership. So the question remains, what will you do with your pain? I hope you will own it. Feel it. Take a step of faith to heal it. Talk to a friend, receive the gift of renewing prayer or a Stephen Minister, talk to a pastor or a counselor. I don't know what the step is for you to take, but it's yours to discern the cutting edge and to take the next step to rewrite your story.

Imagine what your life and relationships would be like if your pain was transformed rather than transmitted. Imagine what marriages and families and churches and communities and countries would be like if pain was transformed rather than transmitted. Imagine people experiencing the love, joy, and peace God intended for us to live and share. This is not a dream, it is really possible.

In a few minutes, we will celebrate communion in which we remember the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. And his story connects with Joseph's story and our story. When we come to this table, we're like this family as we recognize the spiritual famine we suffer without Jesus. We are utterly dependent on him and his goodness, grace, and generosity for our very lives.



And this meal reminds us of how Jesus answered that important question: What do you do with your pain? God created us to know and love him, but we broke his heart by turning away. As the ruling king of the universe, he could have used his power to condemn, but “God so loved the world he sent his only son not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him.” Jesus chose to leave his rightful place at the Father's side to enter the pain of this broken and sinful world to become like us—to become one of us. He knows the reality of grief and separation from the ones we love. As the Lion of Judah and descendent of Judah, he too was the innocent one who chose to stand in our place taking on the guilt of our sin by dying on a cross. By his love, grace, and power we are forgiven of sin, reconciled to God, and have received eternal life. Jesus is the cutting edge of history and of our lives. As we come to this meal, we are reminded that it is because of Jesus' incredible love, sacrifice, and generosity that we are in communion with God, and with all those who trust in Him. And now we

too are free to own our pain, rewrite our story, and follow Jesus in a life of sacrificial love and incredible generosity.