Menlo Park Presbyterian Church
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Series: Unbroken January 15, 2012
Ephesians 6:12; Matthew 5:7; Romans 8:28

"Lessons from Prison"

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We're in this series based on the book *Unbroken* about the extraordinary life of Louis Zamperini. Last week we looked at *Lessons from the Raft*. Next week Louis was scheduled to be with us. I talked to his son on Friday. The bad news is Louis broke his leg on Monday, and the doctor said it would not be a good thing for him to fly up on Saturday. The good news is Louis and his son are *driving* up on Friday. He said he wanted to be here, so he's coming up with a broken leg at the age of 94. Pretty remarkable guy.

This would be a great chance to invite folks to come. We have friends coming. A lot of people, who otherwise might not have been real open to God, are kind of open around this story. There is a good chance that the 9:30 and 11:00 services could be maxed out, so if you have unchurched friends coming, I hope you pray and that you invite folks.

If you do, by all means come to one of these services: 9:30 or 11:00. If you don't, and you're a regular part of our church, the 5:00 service on Saturday next week, and then the 8:00 service on Sunday would probably have more space. So if you could help by coming to one of those services, I think that would help out a lot. Again, we're not sure, but I have a feeling this is going to be pretty maxed out.

Beyond that, again we'll have a lot of folks who are not usually part of church. They don't know how to do the church thing. They might feel a little awkward about it. So you are all deputized to be on the welcoming committee, okay? What that means is, making people feel at home, embracing them, and recognizing they might feel a little uncertain of what to do.

So will there be any attitudes of people selfishly saying, *I want a good seat for me; I don't care about you; I'm just trying to take care of myself?* Will there be any of that kind of stuff? No! There will be none of that. Will we all sacrifice our own comfort, or even our own good seat, to give that up to somebody else who might be here for the first time? You were a little less certain on that one. Yes! Absolutely we will. This is just going to be a great day.

So if you all help us out… Be patient. I'm not sure with parking and bodies and all that kind of stuff, how that will work out, so if you can just come in a prayerful, expectant mode, looking forward to it. If we could all have servant attitudes around here, so everybody who comes, when they go they say, "Man, not only was it great being around Louis, but I just have never seen a community of such welcoming and warm people before." That would be a really cool deal. I think you can do that. That's what we're aiming for next week.

Now a number of people have said they've been so inspired by Louis's life, they would love to meet him personally, shake his hand, and express thanks. One person said they have a grandmother who's 94 and real feisty and quite attractive, and since Louis is single, you know, maybe she could meet Louis and see if there's a little chemistry there. So here's the deal: We're asking Louis to speak at four services. He's 94,

and he has a broken leg. People start to slow down in that situation a lot, so we can't ask him for more than what he'll be doing in the services.

But we thought it would be cool to have notes for Louis. So this week, we have paper around the exits, and if you want to take a sheet of paper and then write him a note this week. Tell him "thanks." Tell him, "You inspired me." Bring that back next week. We'll collect all of those and we'll give them to Louis. We thought that would be a way everybody can personally say thanks.

Here's how we know what Louis will do. We're doing a pop quiz every week. This is the first question of today's pop quiz: Louis has a scrapbook that covers just the years 1917 when he was born, to 1938. His scrapbook covering those years weighs how much? Five pounds, 25 pounds, 63 pounds, or 1,000 pounds? Turn to the person next to you and see if you know the correct answer.

This is from *Unbroken*: "Louis is a packrat who still has the 'Do Not Disturb' sign he swiped from Jesse Owens in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin." Anybody remember or ever hear of Jesse Owens? Louis still has his "Do Not Disturb" sign. His scrapbook, just up to 1938, weighs 63 pounds. So if we give him notes, he will keep them. He will honor them.

Two more pop questions that move toward today's topics: anger, bitterness, and forgiveness. First, how did Louis get revenge on girls who tattled on him when he was in grade school? A: he called them names; B: breathed garlic on them; C: stole their homework; D: kissed them. Turn to the person next to you real quickly. What's the correct answer? This is what Louis writes. This is in his book *Devil at My Heels*: "As revenge, I would take whole cloves of garlic to the classroom, chew on them, then breathe in their direction just to offend them." Do you feel like you're getting to know Louis a little better every week?

One more question: During World War II (Louis is prisoner of war), how did he get a small measure of revenge over one abusive guard nicknamed "The Weasel"? A: got a job as a cook and spit in his soup; B: got a job as a medic and gave him super-laxatives; C: got a job as a barber and shaved his eyebrows to look like Marlene Dietrich's; D: got a job in the laundry and starched his underwear. Correct answer: He said about this guard, "I cut his eyebrows down real thin just like a pencil line, then 'The Weasel' went back to the guardhouse, and I heard two words I'll never forget: Marlene Dietrich." He knew how to go after somebody.

That brings us to today. We're looking at *Lessons from Prison.* What do you do (we all have this and it's going to get real personal for you and me; just fair warning) when you're hurt, when you're angry, when you're bitter? What do you do? How is God involved in that? Where is God? How can you live an unbroken life in the brokenness of broken relationships?

1. *There is such a thing as evil in the world.* There is such a thing as evil. The apostle Paul wrote, ***"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but…against the spiritual forces of evil…"*** This is real. When we talk about anger, when we talk about sin, we're not talking about problems human beings can solve in the flesh. From the beginning, God said to Cain, "Sin is crouching at your door." The Bible teaches that anger involves a spiritual battle too big for us to handle on our own.

Evil is always present on the earth. It often goes unnamed, but sometimes it breaks into the open, and it does in the life of Louis. After he was rescued from the life raft, he was thrown into conditions of unspeakable filth. He was tortured. He was humiliated. He was routinely beaten. He was subject to medical experiments that made him want to die. He was forced into slave labor. He was starved.

When he got food, often it was indescribably awful. Labor would be forced on prisoners till somebody might drop. One form of punishment was one of the guards had all the enlisted prisoners hit their officers in the face as hard as they could. If they didn't hit them hard enough, guards would club *them*. In one two-hour period, all the officers, including Louis, got hit in the face by their own men about 220 times.

Conditions were so brutal that of the 34,000 prisoners of war in Japan, more than 37 percent died there. They never made it out of the camp. They would do anything to fight back. It was very stirring to me at reading through this the courage, and sometimes creativity, people would use to fight back. A group of Scottish prisoners were not only being starved, they were forced to load food for enemy soldiers on boats that enemy soldiers would be able to eat in abundance.

So Louis writes that these starving Scotsmen would drink excessive amounts of tea on the job. The enemy could not figure out why the Scots loved Japanese tea so much. Louis writes, "It was actually an elegantly simple form of sabotage. The Scots would drink tea all day, then take turns peeing on the rice, so that by the time it reached its destination, it had spoiled." I thought that was funny. I guess I'm the only one. Presbyterianism was basically invented by the Scots, so I thought…

For Louis, his darkest moments involved a guard they nicknamed "The Bird." This guy is like something out of fiction. This is a quote: "He would beat POWs every day, fracturing their windpipes, rupturing their eardrums, shattering their teeth, tearing one man's ear half off, and leaving them unconscious. He combined physical with emotional torture. He wanted to humiliate, to destroy a prisoner's sense of humanity." Louis is going to have to deal with this in his heart. Do you have anybody you're mad at? This is going to get personal for us now. What do you do if somebody hurts you?

The prisoner he hated most was Louis Zamperini. The first time he met him he beat him for *not* looking him in the eye, and then beat him for *looking* him in the eye. He illegally kept him from being registered as a POW with the Red Cross so his family could not know he wasn't dead. This is a certificate the U.S. government sent to Louis's family informing them, so they would think their son was dead. He was assigned to clean up pigsty, and he had to use his bare hands with that filth, and eat slop for a pig to stay alive.

One scene you might remember: "The Bird" took off his belt on some trumped up charge. Louis is standing there. With a belt buckle that weighed about a pound, he swung it as hard as he could all the way around till it clocked Louis in the temple, and knocked him down. He lost consciousness, bleeding. When he came to, "The Bird" was standing over him. He offered him a tissue, and was making sympathetic sounds. It was part of what he would do. It was real confusing. Louis thought, *Maybe there's a little compassion in this man. Maybe he's sorry.* He helped Louis to his feet. Louis is just feeling a little relief, and "The Bird" swings again, and the buckle hits him in precisely the same place.

He beat Louis every day. He tried to humiliate, de-humanize him. What do you do when somebody hurts you? I will not go further to describe the evils of the prison. I was so struck reading through this, as I'm sure many of you were, about the suffering that evil inflicts. I have gotten a lot of emails in the last couple of weeks from vets, including one guy, in fact a whole family. This guy, still suffering from wounds that were inflicted on him over 40 years ago in Vietnam, who said Louis's story and faith in God has given him hope, is changing his life.

It made me think how many folks in our own congregation have served in the military, and how Louis's story may bring to mind *their* suffering. How can we ever say thank you enough? How can our church be a place of healing and honor enough? I thought about others of you who have gone through other sufferings from evil. You've been abused. You were molested. You were betrayed. You were violated. You are not alone. There is evil in the world, and God cares about it. God confronts it supremely on the cross. God brought healing to Louis, and he can do that to you.

2. *A single act of kindness can mean the world to a person in pain.* Jesus said, ***"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."*** There are these little moments of hope in the prison that come when one person says, "I will show mercy."

A guard comes up to Louis, knocks on the door, and says, "Are you a Christian?" Louis says, "Yeah." He wasn't sure what to say. Louis had not been to church since he was a kid. Last time he had been to church, he had gotten there late. A priest came down, walked over to him, twisted his ear, and sent him home to get a note from his mom to explain why he came late. He never went back. They handled coming late to church differently back in that day than we do in our day.

Louis told the guard, "Yeah, I'm a Christian." The guard Kawamura said, "I'm a Christian too," and he gave Louis a pencil and paper so they could communicate. He began to give him food out of his own supply. One day another guard came to the cell, and rammed a stick through the door window into Louis's face like he was trying to poke out his eye. The next day, Kawamura saw Louis's bloody face and asked him what happened. When Louis told him, he just lifted his arm and pointed to his bicep. A couple days later, Kawamura came back and pointed out the door so Louis could see that vicious guard, who had now been bandaged around his mouth and his head because Kawamura had taken care of his little friend Louis.

Later on, a private named Yukichi Kano also a Christian, risked his life to sneak charcoal for men to heat their room, or give them blankets to keep them warm, or get them medical help so they could stay alive. He risked his own life to do that for them. Pappy Boyington, another remarkable friend of Louis's who got the Medal of Honor, wrote, "There was a way braver man than I in that camp," and he named this Japanese private, Kano.

These were men who were literally obeying Jesus' command, ***"Love your enemies…"*** Seriously, how is that one going? I was going to apply that this weekend by saying, "Find somebody you don't like and say something nice to them on the way out of church today," but then I thought they would *know* you don't like them, so that's not really a good idea. I was afraid some of you might say something nice to me, and I wouldn't like that either.

So what's a step of love you might take towards somebody where naturally in the flesh you just wouldn't do it? Somebody you just might not like for whatever reason. Something about them puts you off. Somebody you're not inclined to move towards. Just a single act of kindness…noticing, a word, encouragement…can mean the world to somebody in pain. You learn that in prison. That leads to the next lesson…

3. *Time doesn't heal all wounds; God heals wounds.* Louis's suffering was so intense (some of you will experience things like this), years later, after he was out of prison, when he was back in the States, he began to experience flashbacks, and he'd have nightmares every night about "The Bird." He would be filled with rage. He had one dream where he was in his dream finally able to attack "The Bird." When he woke up, he realized he was in his own bed, and he was choking his pregnant wife.

He suffered from what we would now call Post-Traumatic Stress, anger, rage, emptiness. He tried to manage it with a lot of alcohol. We'll look more next week at how he turned to Jesus. Really pray about next week. I think a lot of wonderful things can happen. But Louis heard a young preacher named Billy Graham preach on this verse: ***"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."***

By the way, anybody here ever hear of a quarterback named Tim Tebow? He plays for the Denver Broncos. He's an outspoken follower of Jesus. That's his favorite verse…John 3:16. He loves it so much that he had the numbers 3:16 painted (when they have to do that under-the-eye black paint stuff?) on his face in college. Won the Heisman, so that everybody in the nation would see 3:16, John 3:16, and be kind of intrigued by it. Okay?

Last Sunday, in the playoffs, a thrilling overtime game, the Denver Broncos upset the Pittsburgh Steelers. Tebow was a hero. He threw for precisely 316 yards. I'm not making this up. He averaged 31.6 yards per completion. On Monday, the single most searched term on Google was "John 3:16." That's the first time a Bible verse has ever been number one in the Google search process.

This was such a cool deal, we have decided around here that if there's a great moment in the service, like somebody sings a great song, in response they're going to "Tebow." Debbie insisted we put that out there. I didn't want to do it, but she just said, "Nope, I'm doing it." I understand the Broncos did not have a good game last night. It was not a good night for Tim, I know. But wasn't that a great 49er game? I mean that was… I digress.

It took Louis awhile, but he eventually surrendered his life to Jesus, and often when this happens, God will ask somebody to actually take a step, to do something to put a stake in the ground. For Louis it was alcohol. He went home, and his house was full of liquor: wine, champagne, a 300-year-old bottle of incredibly expensive cognac, and he knew what God was calling him to do. So he took the wine and poured it down the drain. He took the champagne and poured it down the drain. He took the cognac and returned it for a whole lot of money.

Then the next morning he woke up and he had not had a nightmare about "The Bird," and he has not had one since, 94 years old. He said, "It's as if the doctor had cut the hating part of my brain away." God does that. This was Paul's great discovery. ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"*** God is still in that business, and we're able to forgive sinners for one reason: because *I'm* a forgiven sinner. Now God wasn't done with Louis yet. There's another lesson from the prison. This is real important about forgiveness.

4. *Forgiveness is not just therapeutic or relief for the forgiver; it is a loving, humble, repentant quest for reconciliation.* We live in such a therapeutic culture. Sometimes people can even talk about forgiveness in a way that's kind of self-oriented. *It's just about my own relief.* Louis *was* freed from feelings of hatred, but that wasn't the end. God had more in mind. God always does.

One thing Louis knew was he would never return to that country where that prison was. He was quoted in *Time Magazine,* "I'd rather be dead than return to that country. I couldn't stand Japan." Then one day, he heard Bob Pierce back in the 1940s. Bob Pierce founded World Vision. Bob Pierce used to pray, "Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God." Bob said, "You know, there's a great need for

Jesus Christ in Japan." He told this crowd, "Some of you ought to go back to Japan and bring Christ there."

Louis was suddenly pierced by this conviction: God wanted him to go back to Japan. He did not want to go there. He prayed, "Being a new Christian, Lord, I will need a good, swift, kick in the pants to understand if this is your will for me."

On the way to his room at that conference, he gets in a conversation with a young minister named Eric Folsom, and Eric says, "Did you hear what Bob Pierce said about some people needing to go to Japan?" Louis said, "Yeah." Eric said, "I just have this feeling you ought to go. In fact, Louis, God has burdened my heart to give you $500 to start you on your way to Japan." Louis wrote, "I didn't know whether to hug him or hit him." Then a singing group who had heard Bob Pierce's talk came up and said, "We want to give you our tithe money so God can send you to Japan." So Louis went to Japan. He went to Japan, to the people and the place he hated.

In Tokyo, a missionary couple passed a message on from a former soldier, who said to them, "I was one of those who beat Zamperini and broke his nose. Do you think he has really forgiven me?" Louis wrote a note saying, "I have," but as he did, he thought, *You know, it's easy to write. Could I actually say it face to face?*

He ended up at what was called Camp Sugamo. It housed every single one of the 850 war criminals in Japan. Imagine this moment. Louis is preaching the gospel, the good news of Jesus, to these men who beat him, and others like them. He said, "I gave my usual talk, but never with more conviction, about Jesus Christ, his death on the cross for sinners, his resurrection. When I came to the part about how I had been treated in Japanese prison camps, I thought about tempering the details and emotions, so as not to appear too angry, but I didn't, because otherwise my forgiveness would lack true meaning."

I thought this is so profound about how forgiveness is often a long journey, and it will always mean I will have to look at parts of me I didn't think I would have to look at. "It will always take courageous honesty. It is different than excusing. Forgiveness means truth about the wrongs done, coming to grips with how *I* have distorted stuff, as well as other people, because repentance and reconciliation, if they can happen at all, can only happen based on truth."

So Louis went and told them the truth, and told them the gospel, and said, "Does anybody want to receive Christ?" and was stunned at how many hands were raised. Then the commander said, "Those of you who were Louis's guards and heads of prison camps, he'd like to speak to you personally. You may come forward if you wish." Do you have any broken relationships in your life?

Imagine this moment. These people come forward. Louis sees them, numbers of them whom he's named in this book, who cursed him, beat him, starved him, and humiliated him. He felt something he never expected. He actually felt compassion. He actually felt love. What a gift from God. He felt this strange exuberance. (I can't wait to meet this guy!) He leapt off the stage, down into the crowd. He's like doing the mosh pit thing, and he starts going up to these guards and embracing them. He was loving them. He was forgiving them. Only God. This is what Jesus brings.

One of the guards, James Sasaki who decided that day to become a Christian said, "I don't understand how you can forgive us. Your Christianity must be real, but I don't understand it." Louis said, "It *is* real, and if

you continue in your faith, one day you will understand." For a whole bunch of people, *that* was liberation day. This is the last lesson from prison:

5. *God, our God, is still in the business of bringing redemption out of evil.* Let's read this together out loud: ***"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."*** God is working for good in all things in your life.

Louis went on to speak all over the world. He started a boy's camp. He worked with homeless people and retired folks at Hollywood Presbyterian Church. He inspired millions out of the redeemed wreckage of a life, and hatred that got turned, through Jesus Christ, into forgiveness and love. God brings good out of evil in unbelievable ways.

The mayor of Joetsu in Japan asked Louis… Louis went back in 1998. He's now in his 80's. The mayor asked him, "Did anything good come out of your two and a half years as a prisoner of war?" Louis's immediate response was, "Yes. It prepared me for 53 years of married life." I cannot wait to meet this guy. He was still married at the time when he said that. His wife has since passed away.

God brought the cross. God brought forgiveness for my sins and yours out of the worst thing that ever happened. God specializes in working to bring good out of the worst things. For 65 years God has been doing it through Louis, and now it's going to happen for us next week. We'll talk about this more through this year.

I think part of the good God wants to do through Louis is bringing him to us when he's 94 years old. I think God wants us to become a community of courageous conflict-facers, truth-tellers, and forgiveness-givers. I think God has work to do right here with us. I think God wants us to become a community where lingering resentment, and gossip, and talking behind somebody else, and violating Jesus' instruction in Matthew 18:15, "If you have something against another person, you go to them in person, and speak to them to try to win them back…" I think God is at work through Louis, to change the culture, and make us that kind of people.

Next week Louis is going to be here. We'll honor him with notes and recognition, but I'll tell you a way better way to honor him. Who do you need to reconcile with? Where does your heart need to forgive? What if we could say to Louis when he comes next week, "Hey, Louis Zamperini, more than 60 years after you got out of that prisoner of war camp, you have sparked a massive campaign of reconciliation around here. People are going to each other. Louis, because you forgave enemies who spat on you, and beat you, and cursed you, and starved you, because you did that, we have had an outbreak of redemptive, courageous love. The truth is getting spoken, stuff is getting confessed, junk is getting dealt with, and we have all surrendered to Jesus around here, and sought reconciliation in broken relationships."

Wouldn't that be something? That would be a way to honor Louis, and way more than that, a way to honor Jesus, and allow the gospel to change this place, and then change all kinds of folks in our spheres. So I want to ask you to bow your heads right now. This is really serious. This is you and me. This is not Louis. This is nobody else. This is you and me.

What's God calling you to do right now? Where's God at work in your heart? Where's there an attitude? Where have you gotten cold? Where have you just decided, *You know what? I'm going to hold something against this person. I'm going to put them in the category of somebody I don't have to love. I'm going to*

have a hardened heart. I'm going to have a bad attitude. I'm going to have an unforgiving spirit. I choose to do that.

Where do you need to say, "O God, forgive me. O God, help me. O God, I'm the one in prison"? Maybe it involves a spouse, or an ex-spouse. Maybe a coworker. Maybe somebody in your family. Maybe somebody who hurt you badly. Maybe you don't even know what to do yet, and that's all right. God will show you as you're ready.

Will you say right now, "God, I want to surrender my heart; I want to confess my unforgiving spirit"? Then will you take Jesus seriously, and will you go? Will you stop making excuses? Will you stop letting yourself off the hook? Will you make the call? Will you schedule the time together? Will you confess what needs to get confessed? Will you honor Jesus Christ by having the ministry of reconciliation in your life?

There's a little Post-It note in your program. You got it when you came in today. If you want to write down somebody's name, or a next step, whatever God is calling you to do, take that with you. Put it in your Bible, someplace where you'll see it. Tim and Debbie are going to lead in a musical moment here. Just allow God to speak to you and then respond to him as they do that.