

*Note: This transcript has been edited slightly for continuity.*

Thank you so much, Julie. And a big thank you for that beautiful, beautiful song. What a privilege to worship with all of you here this morning, to join together from so many different churches, so many different places and all of us come, you know with a story. I know we all come with a story today.

I want to start by asking you a question. Some would say that what we just experienced was a little taste of heaven. That's a phrase we throw out a lot. It's times in church, if you think back all the way to whatever churches you've been a part of a church—the church of your youth or the church you're at now—think about some moments that God has given you, moments of wonder moments of awe, moments when you say, “We're on holy ground,” when you say, “It's unmistakable that God is in this place.”

I'm grateful that I have countless memories of those kinds of moments, I'll tell you a few. Some of them are from very small gatherings. One was a small group of people that I had the privilege to lead in the worship arts area. And we were on a retreat together, up in a cottage that we borrowed in Wisconsin. It was a hot August afternoon. And I felt led as the leader of that group to put a bowl of water in the middle of the deck, the back deck out there, and we had a circle of chairs, just about 10 of us. And I said, “We're going to wash each other's feet.”

Now I'm a high control person and I had I had a plan I wanted to say watch the feet of the person on your left or whatever. And I sense the Holy Spirit saying, “Don't do that. Let them watch who's ever feet they feel prompted to wash, and it'll be it'll be okay.” And I watched as the first guy got up, one of our worship leaders, grabbed the bowl of water, went purposefully to another guy who he served with a often, and with tears streaming down his face, he confessed to him that he had felt jealous of him. And they have this beautiful moment of exchange. And I watched this humility. And all of us were inspired by that moment.

When my younger daughter, they're both old now in their 20s, but when my daughter was only two years old, she had an unexplained fever, and had to go to Good Shepherd hospital for about five days. My husband was in Arizona, attending the funeral of a close friend, so he was not here. And I could tell you the name of almost every person that came in that hospital room, brought meals to our family, took care of my five-year-old while I was there. And I had the thought that

I bet many of you have had at one time or another in a season of difficulty. How do people go through something like this without the church?

Some more of my moments have to do with baptism. It's like my favorite deal, whether it's in the lake or a swimming pool, or dunking tank, wherever it is, if you're a volunteer or staff person, it feels like payday, right? And it's like, you see transformation up close evidence that God is at work and there's new life in Christ. And I had the chance in a lake with my husband at my side to baptize each of my daughters. And I'll never forget that.

And then there are countless moments of worship, like we just experienced, but everything from a little tiny church in Zimbabwe, to a cathedral in London, to other places where I've had the opportunity—and I don't sing well—but to stand side by side. Next two men and women to join our voices and declare together How great is our God are like this morning. He's a good-good Father. He's a good-good father.

My former pastor used to say there's nothing like the church when the church is working right. And that is absolutely true. I still believe those words. But sadly and tragically, there's also nothing quite like the church when it's not working right. In fact, when it's broken or abusive, or deceitful, or prideful, or exclusive, there's nothing quite like church pain.

And I think you know what I'm talking about, or likely you wouldn't have given up a Saturday in November to be here. There would be no need for Julie Roys and her wonderful team to envision a day like this. We wouldn't need to come together to Restore Chicago, if all too many of us had not been wounded by a church and its leaders.

Church pain is nothing new. I don't know if that's helpful for you to hear. But it goes back all the way to the earliest church when the Apostle Paul and Barnabas had a serious falling out over the role that they thought Mark should play. Down through the centuries well known leaders like George Whitfield from Britain, St. Patrick of Ireland and Jonathan Edwards. They all experienced deep church pain from other Christians.

A study that goes back a few years now by George Barna reveals that nearly 4 out of 10, unchurched people avoid church life because of a bad past experience in

church. And in the past two years here in Chicagoland, two of our largest and most influential churches have been rocked by pastoral failure and division.

Now, although church pain is sadly all too common, many of us find ourselves surprised when it happens. I mean, I believe that when we feel betrayed or wounded by church people, it's worse than similar offenses in the marketplace, because we expect so much more from those who follow Christ.

In fact, I don't know about you, but I never had a category in my mind and hearts for the capacity of Christians to behave so sinfully. But this is to forget or deny the nature of our humanity. In the book of Galatians, Paul reminds us that in our lesser selves, we are all of us, prone to factions and discord and selfish ambition, hate and jealousy, and all kinds of division.

I've discovered in the past few years, that there have been several books written about church pain. Maybe you've read some of them. There's a lot of them out there. And I'm indebted to the author of these books because they provided me with some wisdom and perspective. They certainly affirmed that I am far from alone.

One of the books I highly recommend came out about nine years ago by former Pastor Stephen Mansfield. The book is titled *Healing Your Church Hurt*. And I will draw from it and some other sources today as well. But Mansfield says this, "It is no surprise to the biblically informed that Christians past and present are screwed up. This is in fact, confirmation of the gospel. Every Christian has a capacity for the most magnificent, Christ-likeness. Yet every Christian also has the potential to commit the most disgusting and horrible acts of the flesh."

You know every church every local church is a collection of human beings in need of transformation. The church I've been a part of with my husband for the past six years or so is called Soul City Church in the West loop area of Chicago and this is our mission statement at soul city, "To lead people in a transforming relationship with Jesus. To lead people in a transforming relationship with Jesus." We are all of us, every one of us in process. No Church has perfect people.

I appreciate this description of Basil Pennington and his book about Thomas Merton describing any Community of Christ followers, "We are broken persons and live in broken communities in a state of brokenness." This is depressing. You all want to go home right now, I know. But anyway, we're broken. We are alienated

from ourselves and from each other. We are like a bunch of porcupines trying to huddle together for warmth, who are always driven apart out of fear of the wound we can inflict upon each other with our quills. Did you know you're a porcupine? We are all of us porcupines.

And I think it's safe to say that it is not a matter of if we will get hurt by a church, but when. But the very next question is: How will respond to church pain?

Now many of you are aware of at least some of my story Julie made reference to it. When I added my voice to the voice of several other women calling out abuse from our pastor. My own experience was a very small one. It had taken place many years ago, and I had not shared it before. It did not happen again. And I naively thought I was the only one and this had never happened to any other women like it had happened to me.

But when I heard stories of other women, I sensed a calling that I needed to be an advocate for those who had much more serious stories to tell. And so, I chose to call out the patterns of abuse of power and deceit along with the grooming and harassment of women over several decades. This was devastating. First of all, for me to uncover and learn about which happened about five years ago. And then to even believe. You see, I knew my pastor since I was 15 years old. He was my youth pastor when I was 15 years old, and he had a profound influence on me and countless other people around the world.

And when I became aware of allegations and stories of his sinful behavior, like most people, I didn't want to believe it, let alone go public with it. I felt deeply wounded by how church leaders have responded to the information that they were given both back then all the way back in 2014, when we first went to the elders, even to today with a new group of elders. It's been several years for me stewarding this information and trying to be an advocate for truth and repentance while also forging my own path of healing. And I admit I have not done it perfectly.

One of my lowest moments happened after the resignations of first the pastor then the entire elder board, and the executive pastor. And one Sunday morning, I went out in my bathrobe to get the Chicago Tribune at the end of my driveway, brought it up into the house opened it up, and it was a front-page story. And I looked at it and thought, "How in the world did we get here? How did we get here?" I never would have wanted the I helped to start be broken in this way.

And I knew that I had played a part in bringing the truth to light. In the month after the story broke, I had not foreseen how difficult it would be to read certain comments on social media, to be labeled and mistrusted by people I know as well as many strangers to have my motives and character called into question, to be called a liar, and a collaborator.

Now, each of us has massively important decisions to make when we experienced church pain. We must not be naive about our common enemy, the evil one. He's seeking to kill and destroy all communities of faith. And he delights in our division and in our brokenness. And the most natural result of our pain is to choose the path of cynicism, and hardness of heart. We are all inclined to add more and more fuel to our anger. And our resentment and our bitterness. And the very real danger for you and for me is that we will allow our pain to drive us away from God.

We may be angry, understandably, but we may be angry that God could allow his people to be so cruel. I am learning. This is no big aha for most of you, but I am learning that my greatest personal growth is triggered by seasons of hardship and grief.

Now, adversity we have to be clear, doesn't always lead to growth. Not always. This depends on us cooperating with the inner work that God wants to do in our souls. If I have a favorite verse, it's probably Proverbs 4:23, which says, "Above all else," gets your attention right away, "Above all else, guard your heart. For everything you do flows from it." Another version says, "For it is the wellspring of life." Guard your heart.

I've often been asked in the past couple years, "How are you doing?" Or, "How is it with your soul?" And I don't want to answer too quickly or too simplistically. And my answer would certainly be different on different days. The stuff flowing out of my heart was sometimes better than others. But overall, I would say that God has helped me to make the pain redemptive. Good things have been birthed in a season of loss and grief.

My husband Warren says that prior to this mess, we were both kind of coasting along in our faith. You know, recent empty nesters to sort of coasting along, maybe a little too comfortable, not being stretched. So, there's that. They'll comfort sounds pretty good. Much of the time, doesn't it? God yearns to make your pain and mine redemptive.

In his classic book *Restoring Your Spiritual Passion*, Gordon MacDonald writes, “Hard to times can make us better if we go through them in a redemptive way. Otherwise, hard times can just kill us or crush our spirits. So, we are never whole again. But then yes, hard times can lift us to new heights. If we learn what we can about ourselves during those hard times and let those lessons lead us to a wiser, weightier life.”

How can you and I guard our hearts and make the choice for freedom and for growth? Julie proposed the title for this session, which was, “Surviving Abuse With Your Faith Intact.” The more I reflected on this, the more I realized I don’t want to just survive. I want to thrive. I want to faith it’s stronger than it was before.

Now I have no five easy step formula to give you right now. Hopefully, though, a few learnings from my process of healing, which I’m still in the middle of by the way. I want to share with you things that have helped me to guard my heart and may occur not in a linear fashion, but mostly simultaneously back and forth. And they occur on some days better than others.

But all along the way, especially when you first experienced church pain, it’s important to assess the damages. Honestly, assess the damages. I had to identify the pain I was feeling and name it specifically. Sally Scammell in her book *Recovery From Church Hurts* states this, “Some of the worst actions done in God’s name involves sexual, emotional, physical, or spiritual abuse. If you have been on the receiving end of that abuse, I come to you on behalf of the church to say that what happened to you is wrong. Very wrong. You did not deserve it. It was not God and it never will be. God never operates in abuse. those actions are not the heartbeat of Jesus or of his church. followers.”

I don’t know what your story is today. Some of you have experienced the abuse of power. Others were affected by deceit in the church or greed and money mismanagement. Some of us have been sexually or physically abused. Or maybe your experience was one of being excluded or disinvited in some way. Whatever your experience was, don’t sugarcoat it, or deny it, or excuse what happened. Don’t minimize it. You need to name it and assess the damages.

It may be helpful for you to write down your story, so you can see it in words. Many of us have benefited from seeing a counselor—someone who can help us work through our pain and our hurt. You know, we’re all wired differently when it comes to how we handle our feelings. My big temptation is to try to move on too quickly because I don’t want to feel it all. Many of us seek escape, numbing out

with TV, sleeping or eating too much, or even substance or alcohol abuse or pornography.

One of my friends keeps telling me that I need to feel my feelings all the way down. I will continue to work on that it's hard for me. But to guard my heart, I cannot stay stuck with just assessing the damages I must name it, I must assess them, but then what I will describe next is exceedingly difficult. You and I need to own what we need to own. Own what we need to own. All along the way. We have to look at our part and ask, "What did I personally contribute to this situation?"

Now here's what rises up in me as soon as I asked that question and maybe rising up in you right now in capital letters, "DEFENSIVENESS." And also, "self-righteousness and pride." Because you know what? I think we're afraid that if I own whatever I need to own, it will minimize what other people did. It will somehow gloss over their sin. I want to see the situation as the good guys and the bad guys. I have way too much sinful energy, bolstering my perspective as the right one, and the truthful one, and I want to nurse my resentment, and imagine all kinds of horrific things happening to those who offended me. Am I alone? In the sins, am I the only one?

Well, here's what I know to be true. My heart cannot be healthy if it is filled with bitterness and poison and a desire for revenge. That path leads to a truly hardened heart. Let's look at Hebrews 12 for just a moment, "Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy. Without holiness. No one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter roots grows up to cause trouble and to file many."

Stephen Mansfield describes two key Greek words in this verse and I am not a Greek scholar, but this really helps me understand. You see, the word bitter comes from the Greek word pikros, which means to cut, or to prick—to be pointed or sharp. And the Greek word for defile is miano, which means to stain or die with color. The author of Hebrews is telling us that we should not allow the sharp, pungent nature of bitterness to defile or color us. Don't let the poison of bitterness infect you.

As I own what I need to own, I need to confess sins of pride and self-righteousness. And I'm doing the work of forgiveness. And I choose that phrase very intentionally because it is a process not a one-time statement, I am doing the

work of forgiveness. There's nothing natural about forgiveness. It is a choice. It is not the same thing as reconciliation. I can choose to forgive no matter what the other people do, because Jesus asks me to forgive as I have been forgiven. My offenders may not ever apologize or repent. But I can still own what I need to own and forgive out of obedience for the sake of my own heart.

This leads to another huge learning; I need to let go of what I need to let go off. Now we already explored letting go of bitterness. But here's a few other things that I'm learning to let go of. First of all, there's an illusion I have, I want to confess this illusion to you. It's a fantasy really, that someday every single person who wronged me in any way will come to me and to the public, to the world really, and they will specifically declare all that they did wrong and they will agree 100% with my narrative of what happened and they will beg me for forgiveness. And they will seek full reconciliation.

That is never going to happen. Never. And even if it did, it will not bring me the healing that I truly need. So, I need to let go of that illusion. I also need to let go of my anger and my desire for revenge.

These words from Frederick Buechner are so very true. He says, "Of the seven deadly sins anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last tooth-some morsel, both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back. In many ways it is a feast for a king. The chief drawback is that what you were wolfing down in yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."

Gotta let go of anger. And then I need to let go of my need for everyone to approve of me, to like me to completely believe me and agree with me. If you're familiar at all with the Enneagram tool, I'm a 3, which means that I'm far too concerned with seeking approval and managing my image. And this has been one of the biggest lessons for me in the past couple years—to see that I can be okay, even when many people don't agree with me or like me or Believe me. And I'm increasingly learning to let go of that need. And this has helped me to be free in ways that I haven't really been free before.

And I want to be very clear that we are not letting go of advocacy, for transparency for justice, for deep and full repentance. We must continue to call certainly leaders, especially elders and senior staff, to name specifically the wrongs that have been committed, to publicly apologize and to make things right with the victims.

But I'm seeing that this is wisdom, every day from the Holy Spirit, to discern when it is time to speak, and when it's time to be silent. When should we fight the battle for justice? When should we lay down our sword and let God be the judge?

Perhaps my biggest cost and to all of us regarding the process of healing and guarding your heart is to lean into community. It's what you're doing today, even if you came alone, you're seeking community. We can't attempt to fight these battles on our own. You know, when we're hurt in a church. We are very tempted—I know I was—to isolate ourselves to give up on community all together.

In Nelson Mandela's autobiography he says that it was the relationships in prison on Robben Island that got him through 30 years of suffering. While none of us have endured anything close to the pain of his experience, we can learn from his wisdom. Mandela wrote, "The authorities greatest mistake was to keep us together. For together our determination was reinforced. We supported each other and gain strength from each other. Whatever we knew, whatever we learned, we shared and by sharing, we multiplied whatever courage we had individually, the stronger ones raised up the weaker ones and both became stronger in the process."

I cannot personally imagine the past few years without the support, the truth telling, the compassion of my family and my friends and people at my church. They've given me perspective. They've cried with me. And so often, they have offered their prayers. We desperately need the wisdom of one another. We can't do this alone.

But being alone sounds so appealing. Many people hurt by churches decide, you know what? Going forward, it's just going to be Jesus and me. I give up on this institution called the church. But I want to remind you, I want to remind you that isolation is not an option for true followers of Jesus. Later, Wade Mullins is going to talk to us more about this. But Stephen Mansfield says that Jesus has a thing for his bride. Jesus has a thing for his bride. We cannot opt out. We can't say we love God and hate all those people.

Whether we like it or not, the local church is still God's plan A for reconciling the world to Himself. Often, I look up to heaven, especially in recent years and say "What was Your plan B? Because we are really messing this up." And there has to be another way. But I still hold out hope for the local church for the bride of Christ. And we're here today because we want to make it more radiant, and more

beautiful. I will stay committed to the community. I'm a part of down in the city. I will pray for that search regularly as well. As for my former church.

You know, a few weeks ago, my younger daughter, Johanna ran the Chicago Marathon you may recall, it was a very cold day. She's 26 and she had been training with the World Vision team to try to raise money for clean water. And most of her training experience was pretty positive until towards the end, when she started to struggle with shin splints. You may be familiar with those and also something called the IT band in her quad.

Anyway, the point is, it really began to hurt every time she was training. And her dad and I kept hinting being protective. You know? Maybe you should take a pass on this. You don't want to do permanent damage. Well, she'd already raised money. And she was determined she was going to do this. So, race day came, and we parked ourselves. Our first spot was at our church because the race goes right by our church on Adams at the halfway points. And we made a huge poster said, "Go Joe Go." And we were holding it up. And I was so nervous to see what she was going to look like at the halfway point. A

nd when she passed us, she was radiant, had this huge smile on her face. And I thought it's, it's good, it's good. I think the pains that are control that's so great. When we found out later that it was about mile 16 when the pain started to set in. And up until that point, she was running with her new training buddies from the World Vision group. And they hung together. I thought this was kind of remarkable. When someone needed to use the Porta Potty they would all just wait because they wanted to stay together the race, but at about mile 16, 17 when she had to really slow it down because of her legs, she said to that group, "Please, I don't want to hold you back, go on ahead."

And so, they did, until the very last mile, one of the girls found her again and finished the race with her. But there were literally like a million people down there. And if you ever done this, it's insanity. And so, at the last point where we could actually see her where she would have a mile to go, we were pushing against crowds, and we were trying to catch her face and see her at that last moment before she'd be invisible till the end. And we were shouting her name and she did not see us shouting her name. And I looked at her face. And as her mom, I knew she was in agony.

Every, it just looked awful. And I started to cry. And I thought she was terrible. We found our way to the finish line. And we had to work through crowds and crowds of people and finally we see her. And she had finished and she comes up and bursts. Tears, sobbing, and I could not be more proud of her. She fought through all of that pain.

My friends, do you know that in the big picture all of us are in a race. We're in a race. In chapter 11 of Hebrews, Paul describes the heroes who have gone before us men and women who faced ridicule and jeers and torture and prison, and he says they were destitute and persecuted and mistreated. And then we come to these words in chapter 12. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything and the sin that so easily entangled and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus. Jesus, the author, and perfect of our faith who for the joy set before Him endured the cross scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

Brothers and sisters, you and I have a race to run. Let's not allow our church pain to cause us to give up and lose hearts. We need to do the difficult work of truth telling and forgiveness and healing. We need to throw off anything that will keep us from finishing well. The world is watching. And the Chicago area is watching to see if we're going to give up on God and give up on the church. I for one, refuse to quit, as the Apostle Peter one said "Where else shall we go, where else shall we go?"

Let us not minimize the sins that have been committed including our own. May we leverage our pain for Good for growth. And may we tell instantly guard our hearts, may we not just survive, but truly thrive.

I'd like to lead you in a time of prayer. And I'm going to ask you to bow your heads and walk you through just a little bit of prayer. We're talking about lament earlier. And some of you may need a much longer time of lament and what I'm going to offer right now. But some of you in this room no doubt, have been abused in some way by a church could have been power could have been sexual abuse could have been money investment could be anything but please bow your heads. And allow yourself to remind yourself that that was not God's design or plan and just tell him how sad you are. Just remind him that you were broken at some point.

You may be on the healing process, just remember the wound and name it and don't excuse it. Now I'd invite you to open your hands up. As you're sitting there right on your lap. Just open up your hands for a moment and ask God What are you asking me to let go of? What should I let go of? Is there anger in me? That I need to release? Is there bitterness, coloring my whole perspective. God, what do I need to let go of what do I need to confess to you that I should own in this whole mess? release it to your father. One more step. Open your eyes if you would ask you to do a courageous thing. If your faith is feeling really wobbly these days because of your church pain, would you be willing to stand?