When I was a teen growing up in the ‘70s – you know, that decade where some of the greatest fashion statements were ever created – I went through a stage where I started where necklaces. One accessory that became popular were wood bead necklaces made with a leather straps and wore tightly around the neck. The wood beads were different colors and shapes. They were pretty cool and I looked good wearing them. After that, I moved on to a 24-carat gold chain. Of course, I had to keep one extra button unbuttoned for everyone to see the necklace. Didn’t have to worry about the chain pulling hair off my chest back then because, quite frankly, I didn’t have any.

In the Old Testament and in Christian music, chains are often used as a metaphor for our bad deeds, our wrong doings and those times we chose to go against the will of God. We can see in our minds these heavy chains wrapped around our neck & shoulders. We feel this heavy weight holding us down, keeping us from living a full life, filled with joy.

Now, I haven’t worn beaded or gold jewelry around my neck for decades, but I’ve worn those metaphorical chains around my neck and shoulders several times. Some of them were pretty heavy, almost more than I could bear. Sometimes pride would keep me for taking action to resolve what I was dealing with, but in time I knew I had to do something. I got to where I could no longer ignore it and I didn’t want the situation to affect my emotional and possibly physical health as well. The sooner I resolved the issue, the better everyone involved would feel. It’s just a matter of doing the right thing.

Sound familiar? How many of us are carrying those chains today? (I’m not asking for a show of hands, but a time of reflection) Maybe it’s just a little chain – Like the time a little lie was told, really didn’t hurt anyone, maybe we just wanted to get out of doing something we really didn’t want to, what’s the big deal, right?

Or maybe a heavier chain; like when we do something for our own personal gain. And, in doing so, causing someone else to lose something. Being deceitful; making a detrimental comment behind someone’s back; going over someone’s head in the chain of command, knowing very well what impact this decision would have on them; putting personal interests ahead of others, but at what cost?

Now, I’m not going to stand here and recreate every possible scenario of bad deeds or wrong doings. My goal is not to stir up your emotions. But, I want us to consider how our words and actions affect those around us and what course of action we should take after choosing to negatively impact someone life.

Simply put, we need to seek forgiveness. If we want to lose those chains weighing us down, we need to reach out to those we have harmed and ask for forgiveness. Now, I know that this is very easy for me to say, but sometimes very hard to do. Either our pride gets in the way or we’ve let it go on for so long that we’re afraid of what might happen. And that fear keeps us from doing the right thing. However, how freeing is it to reach out to those we have hurt and seek forgiveness? Whether or not the apology is accepted, we still feel a sense of relief, a weight off of our shoulders. Is there someone in your life you need to reach out to and seek forgiveness? If so, I encourage you to take that step as soon as possible. To find the strength, remove any obstacles, and free yourself of this burden.

Of course, sometimes our transgressions come with a second chain – one for the wrong we have committed toward another and one for our inability to forgive ourselves. Forgiving ourselves is an important step toward relieving that burden and moving on from that situation. Reach out to God, seek His guidance, let the Holy Spirit lead you and comfort you. This is a time when we need to put our trust in God, allow him to give us strength to do the right thing and comfort us during what could be an emotional experience.

There’s another set of chains some of us may be carrying – those times when someone has hurt us and we are struggling to forgive. Have you ever had a situation in your life where you found it almost impossible to forgive someone? What impacted did that have on your life? Does it make a difference if they asked for forgiveness or not? Have you said, “I forgive you”, but the weight is still there and it’s clear you haven’t let it go?

As we read in today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus made it clear that we need to have a forgiving heart. There are no limits on the number of times we should forgive someone else. What was his answer to Peter? We should forgive someone not just seven times, but seven times seventy.

I’ve witnessed the impact of how choosing not to forgive has had on an individual. (Shared personal story related to someone unable to forgive and the impact it has had on his life and those around him)

Then, there’s the third set of chains – SIN. Clearly, much of what I’ve already mentioned qualifies as sin, but these chains are for the words, actions, attitudes and thoughts that do more to harm our relationship with God than those around us. Those times we go against His word, ignore the teachings of Christ and do the opposite of what God has called us to do. Those times we put ourselves first.

Earlier we prayed together “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against”. Did we mean it? Sometimes I worry that reciting the Lords Prayer becomes routine and lacks the conviction it deserves. I also wonder if we focus more attention on the first part, seeking God’s forgiveness, then we do on our own ability to forgive others.

The good news is that God is approachable. He wants us to call upon him, to lay our burdens at his feet and seek his guidance. He is ready to forgive us the second we ask for it. How do we know this?

GRACE. The unfailing love that God has shown us through the life, death and resurrection of His son, Jesus Christ. No matter how hard we try to change our ways, we still sin. He knows it’s going to happen. BUT, he loves us anyway.

One of my favorite songs is Sidewalk Prophets “You Love Me Anyway” – In this song, they compare our sinful selves to the same people who turned on Jesus the day he was crucified. It’s a powerful message, listen to these words:

I am the thorn in your crown

But You love me anyway

I am the sweat from Your brow

But You love me anyway

I am the nail in Your wrist

But You love me anyway

I am Judas' kiss

But You love me anyway

See now I am the man who yelled out from the crowd

For Your blood to be spilled on this earth shaking ground

Then I turned away with a smile on my face

With this sin in my heart, tried to bury Your grace

And then alone in the night I still call out for You

So ashamed of my life, my life, my life.

But You love me anyway

It's like nothing in life

That I've ever known

Yes You love me anyway

Oh Lord, how You love me

Jesus demonstrated the true meaning of grace as he hung on the cross. After everything he had been through that day, he said “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing?” Ask yourself, if Jesus can forgive, can’t we find it in our heart to forgive as well? Isn’t that part of the call to love one another?

Because of Grace, we can break free of these chains.

Were it not for grace, I honestly don’t know where my life would be today.

As we finish the messy series, I would like to close this message with another of my favorite songs. Please listen and reflect on these words as Mary Fogle sings “Were It Not For Grace”.

Here is a YouTube link for the song “Were It Not For Grace” by Larnelle Harris:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6FH5oq3J-M