

Wounded Healers

There is an ancient fable that tells about a time when the Devil tries to get into heaven. He pretends to be the risen Christ. He's disguised and decked out in light and splendor. He arrives at heaven's gate with a band of demons dressed as angels of light. He shouts out the words of the psalms: "Lift up your heads, O gates!...that the King of glory may come in." The angels in heaven are delighted and respond in the psalm's refrain: "Who is the King of glory?" Satan boldly opens his arms and says, "I am." But when they see the palms of his hands, there are no scars. No evidence of his wounds. The angels in heaven see he is an impostor and slam shut the gates of heaven against him.

Last Sunday we learned about the utter chaos of that first Easter morning. Today the chaos continues. Today we meet the disciples on Easter Sunday *evening* -- in hiding. And they're scared. Just like the women at the tomb on Easter morning. The chaos, confusion and despair have escalated and are overwhelming by this point. They've heard the rumors. Jesus is risen from the dead. Yeah, right. Most likely, someone has stolen his body, and most likely, the disciples are going to be on the A list as suspects. They don't know *what's* going on, nor do they have a clue about what's going to happen next. So, they gather together, lock themselves in a room, and hide. And wait. Afraid, ashamed, traumatized.

Then quietly, with no fanfare at all, Jesus comes and simply stands among them. He does not stand outside the locked door, knocking. Nor does he break the door down. Nor does he go away, offended by their fear. He says, just like we do every Sunday, "Peace be with you." And then he opens his hands and shows them his side – his wounds. And unlike the devil, Jesus is recognized by those marks and the disciples rejoice. It's really him! They know him by his wounds. In that simple recognition itself there is healing.

The late Roman Catholic priest Henri Nouwen wrote a book called *The Wounded Healer*. He drew his inspiration from *this* story: A rabbi comes across the prophet Elijah and says to him: "Tell me – when will the Messiah come?" Elijah replies, "Go and ask him yourself." "Where is he?" says the Rabbi. "He's sitting at the gates of the city," says Elijah. "But how will I know which one is he?" The prophet says, "He is sitting among the poor, covered with wounds. The others unbind all their wounds at the same time and bind him up again, but he unbinds only one at a time and binds it up again, saying to himself, "Perhaps I shall be needed; if so, I must always be ready so as not to delay for a moment."

Henri Nouwen says what he finds impressive about this story are these two things: first, the faithful tending of one's *own* woundedness and second, the willingness to move to the aid of other people and to make the *fruits* of one's own woundedness available to others."

I think that's a big part of what it means to follow Jesus, to be Easter people, to practice resurrection in our lives. And it starts, sometimes, with accepting our own vulnerability. It starts with having enough presence of mind and heart to acknowledge our pain, confusion, or despair, and then give it up to God. Otherwise we run the risk of letting our pain, confusion or despair lead us without even being aware of it. We snap at people for what seems like no reason. We're self-obsessed or over-focused in order to avoid feeling whatever it is that bubbles below the

surface. Being a wounded healer begins with being stewards of our own pain. And it means taking responsibility for it so that we don't visit that pain on others. And then sharing that experience in such a way that it might bring *healing* to others.

There are a lot of wounded healers at St. John's. One of the purposes of the Wednesday evening Lenten talks is to let their stories help renew and strengthen our faith. We heard from April Cooke and the challenges she faced with uncertainty around relocating and how God saw her through. We heard from Joe Sabo and his encounters with strangers and what he learned from them, and the experience of his daughter's death by suicide. We heard from Teri Long about her challenges as a poor single mother and her addiction to pain killers and how she has turned that wounding into the healing ministry of heading up the St. John's food pantry. We heard from Becky Nickels about how she found St. John's after a divorce and has become a leader in so many ways. We heard from Howard Zuckerman about his journey to find a faith that worked for him and his calling now as a counselor to those struggling with addiction. The common thread in all these stories, I think, is a desire to abandon self to God and to allow God to bring hope and healing to others out of the fruit of their wounds.

The same is true for St. John's collectively. I am learning that you are a wounded people on a journey of healing. The longer I am here, the more the stories emerge, and I am privileged to witness their telling. The past fifteen years have been difficult and challenging for this congregation. And I am confident that God is walking with you toward resurrection, and that any scars you bear are an important part of the next chapter God is beginning to write with you now.

In the children's book, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the Skin Horse tells the velveteen rabbit the secret to becoming real: "It doesn't happen all at once. You *become*. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are real, you *can't* be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

Wounded healers are *real* people and they know it. And the church that rises up in response to the risen Christ is a *collection* of very *real* people who gather, week in and week out, around the healing balm of his body and blood, broken and poured out to make the wounded whole. Our compassionate God embraces us and heals us so we too might rise up and offer the fruit of our wounds for healing the world God loves. Thanks be to God for the scars by which we recognize the risen Christ among us. Alleluia! Christ *is* risen! Amen.

Pastor Dana Runestad

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