

July 27, 2009
Park Road Baptist
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Text: John 20:19-28
Subject: Wounds, Thomas

TOUCH THE WOUNDS

There are so many wounds in our world. Some are visible: blindness, loss of a limb, loss of hair from chemotherapy. My loving Mother had both legs amputated from diabetes before she died. Her wounds were obvious. Every Sunday when we took her to church, lunch (and a margarita), people often stared because of her visible wounds.

However, not all wounds are visible. That doesn't mean they are any less real. There are the wounds of depression, heartbreak, addiction, loneliness, hopelessness, guilt, rage or despair. All of us have been wounded in our lives and bear the scars, whether visible or invisible. On the surface they might not show, but so often underneath, they are festering. Visible or invisible, all wounds need the healing ointment of God's love.

Clovis Chappell said there are three kinds of people: the wounded, those who do the wounding, and those who heal the wounds. What kind of person are you?

In our scripture today the disciples are dealing with their own wounds. It is after Jesus' crucifixion, death and burial. Our scripture lesson tells us that this scared group of disciples was "sitting crowded together in a room with the door locked and the shades drawn, scared sick they'd be the ones to get it next." (Frederick Buechner) Suddenly, in the midst of this fearful gathering, Jesus appears through the locked doors. He greets them with what they needed, with what we all need, a word of peace. Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on them, gives them a few instructions and leaves. It was short – but such a transformational encounter for this scared bunch of disciples.

There's only one problem. Thomas wasn't there. Who knows where he was? What we do know is that Thomas wasn't about to believe the disciples' story about Jesus being alive, any more than the disciples had believed the woman when they told them their story. "No!" Thomas said. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25b). Thomas was too wounded to believe this rumor that the disciples had seen Jesus. You see, Thomas had thought that Jesus was the Messiah. He was devastated when Jesus was arrested like a common criminal. When Jesus died, a huge part of Thomas died, too: his hopes, his dreams, his beliefs. Thomas wasn't going to fall for some story about the disciples seeing Jesus and be hurt again. He had to see for himself – he had to touch.

Jesus must have known that because eight days later, Jesus appears to the disciples once again through locked doors. This time, Thomas is present. Again, Jesus offers a word of peace. Then Jesus goes directly to Thomas and invites him to touch his wounds, to actually place his fingers into scars on his hands and to put his hand in the wound on his side. Jesus said to Thomas, "It is me. You can recognize me from my wounds. Believe." Only then, says the scripture story, was Thomas persuaded.

So throughout history Thomas is known as the Doubter because he didn't believe it was Jesus until he had seen and touched for himself. I think Thomas gets a bad rap. I don't think doubt is all bad. In fact, I believe doubting can be important – even essential – to our faith. As Frederick Buechner says, “Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith....it keeps it alive and moving.”

Think of the giants of our faith. John Wesley, Martin Luther, Mother Teresa. Their journals are full of their doubts, and how those doubts motivated them in their continual search for faith in God. I believe Thomas was asking the relevant question not only for himself, but for us as well: “How does the world believe in Jesus when he is not longer with us?” Isn't that the question our fearful and doubting world asks today? Isn't that the question that we often ask ourselves, especially when we are hurt and wounded? Jesus' words echo through history: “Touch my wounds. Put your finger in my hands; touch the sore in my side. Touch my wounds.” Is that how we are to believe as well?

I asked the children, let me now ask you: how many of you have broken a bone or had stitches? It looks like there have been plenty of wounds in our church family. We've had our share of broken bones and stitches in my family as well. One especially stands out that happened when our son, Carey, was 6 years old. It was the first time we had let Carey go to a birthday party without his mom or dad. Carey was playing on the swing when he slipped, fell to the ground and split open his chin. From what I heard, blood was everywhere. But I really don't know because, I wasn't there. This was before cell phones (if you teenagers can imagine.) I was home in my yard planting flowers.

The mother of the birthday boy called our house trying to reach me. No answer. I was in the yard planting flowers. So the Mom goes by Matthews UMC where she knew I was a pastor, holding Carey as he bled everywhere. She grabbed a church member and frantically asked, “Where is Pastor Maria?” No one knew. So the Mom takes Carey to the emergency room. Meanwhile, the church member goes in a panic, interrupts Pastor Mark's Bible Study, and says some unknown woman had burst into the church holding Carey who was bleeding everywhere. Immediately, Pastor Mark cancels the Bible Study, grabs the Children's Director and they rush to the hospital. “Thank God,” said the nurse when she saw Mark and Sandy, “You must be Mr. and Mrs. Hanlin.” “No,” said Mark, which meant they couldn't sign the forms for Carey to have surgery.

Then the senior pastor hears about Carey and rushes to the hospital. The nurse said, “Thank God, you must be Mr. Hanlin?” No. Finally, Tim goes by the birthday house to pick up Carey and is greeted with those dreaded words, “Everything is going to be ok, but....your son is in the emergency room.”

The nurse hugged Tim when he walked into the emergency room door and said he was Mr. Hanlin. “Sign these” she said as she threw papers at Tim, “so we can stitch up your son.” The nurse told Tim it would be easier for Carey if Tim worked the q-tip of numbing medicine into the wound on Carey's chin before they operated. Tim said he was so proud at how brave Carey was – and how very proud he was of himself for not passing out as he worked the medicine into the wound. Touching wounds is not easy.

When we have doubts about our faith today, how are we to believe? Jesus said to Thomas, “Touch the wounds.” Quite a challenge indeed in this day when the fear to touch has made AIDS patients all the more rejected, while the homeless are pulled from city streets by hands covered with latex rubber gloves. It is hard for us to think about the hungry or homeless children – over 3,000 right here in Charlotte – much less touch them. But how will they know the love of Jesus if we don’t reach out and touch them with his love? And like Thomas, how will we know Jesus unless we touch the wounds?

A couple of weeks ago, Mecklenburg Ministries’ Youth Council sponsored a Summer Service Sleepover. These multicultural youth (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Unitarian and Baha’i) rode the bus across the city, took a “homeless walking tour”, served at Crisis Assistance Ministry. With compassion, dedication and tears the youth shared what they learned and how they are determined to make a difference. Some of their thoughts:

- I can’t forget the woman sleeping outside the gate of Urban Ministries or the homeless man with his dog under the freeway. And it was such a hot day.
- There were a pair of shoes sitting in a pile of clothes left by a homeless person by the railroad tracks....my sister has that same pair of shoes.
- It costs \$35 or more to shelter a pet at the vet for a day.....and only \$17 to shelter a person a day. Do we care for our pets or people more.....why?

Listen to some of the prayers of these young people:

- God, help us reach the goal of having no more homeless in Charlotte in 10 years.
- God, please place the power to decrease and eliminate homelessness in the most influential hands available at the present time.
- Allah, help us to help all those in such difficult situations.

It was a sacred service sleepover as these interfaith youth recognized God in the homeless person sleeping under the overpass, the cardboard box by the railroad tracks that represents someone’s home, the wounds of the most vulnerable in our society.

Jesus comes to us incognito time and time again. He appears through the locked doors of our hearts, our fears, our prejudices and says, “Peace to you. Do you want to know me? Touch the wounds.” It might be the homeless person you pass on your way to your job downtown who needs a kind word. It might be the child sitting beside you in school who is bullied and rejected and needs a friend. It might be the neighbor who is in the middle of a divorce and has no church to call home. The scars will all be there – just look – then reach out and touch them. Jesus says, in so doing, you will know him.

When Tim and I lived in California, we had three cats (that is two too many.) I knew, no matter what, I did not want four cats – ever. Then Trouble moved into the house across the street. Trouble was our neighbor’s cat who, unfortunately, was soon neglected. Trouble was never allowed into their house, the kids threw things at him, the parents yelled at him, and over time, they stopped feeding him regularly. Trouble began looking pretty scrawny, his hair dull and matted. It didn’t take Trouble long to look across the street and see how good our cats had it. So Trouble decided to move on over.

“No Way, Jose!” was my response. But Trouble would come running every time he saw my car. When I opened our back door, Trouble would shriek past me and gobble up all of our cats’ food before I could catch him and throw him out. Trouble was hungry....and I never ceased to be amazed at how fast he could eat when given a chance.

So...I began leaving water and our cats’ leftover food outside for him. On cold nights, Trouble would sit outside our sliding glass doors, meowing pitifully, while our cats rested cozily in front of the fireplace. So, occasionally, I begin letting Trouble in (but only on cold or rainy nights!) Trouble was treated like a second class cat in our house. I felt guilty about how good our cats had it when compared to Trouble.

One sunny California morning, I was in a bigger hurry than usual. I had to testify at the murder trial for one of my youth from Northridge UMC. Fifteen year old Marc Squires had been shot at a party and died the next morning, Thanksgiving morning. Now an agonizing 18 months later, his murderer, a 17 year old kid himself, was coming to trial. Marc was the rowdy one of our confirmation class. Did he ever test my faith with his questions – you know, the ones us adults politely avoid when discussing our faith. Marc’s doubts pushed him to delve deeper into this faith he was claiming. Marc’s dad was Chairperson of our Church Board, his mom a Sunday School teacher. Marc was dead at 15. At the trial, the parents of the 17 year old boy who killed Marc were also deeply wounded because their son was on trial for murder. Wounds were everywhere.

On the morning as I was getting ready for the trial in my best suit, Trouble sneaked into our house for food. I grabbed him up and unceremoniously threw him out the door. He ran off and a few minutes later, I hopped into my car and started down the street. But Trouble always came running when he heard my car. I never saw him – just felt a thump under the wheel, and then that sick feeling as I looked in the rearview mirror and saw Trouble convulsing in the middle of the street. Horrified, I wanted to keep driving away. I did not want to see his pain. It took all I had to park the car, go and sit beside the bleeding, broken Trouble as he lay dying in the middle of the street. I talked to him, petted him, cried over Trouble....and over Marc....and over all of the people in the world treated like second class citizens: the wounded, the homeless, the hungry; those who would be happy to have the leftovers from our table; those who are starving for love. Those for whom trouble is a way of life. And as I sat in my best suit, petting this wounded, dying cat, I again promised Jesus I would learn from Trouble and all those who run after us for help....who run to the church or the government or Crisis Assistance Ministry or to anyone who might give them food, love, or a place to call home.

Are you like Thomas, facing doubts in your faith? Do you want to know Jesus? Then your homework for this week: 1.) Search for the wounded and touch them with Christ’s love. Hug a hurting person, befriend the one bullied at school, greet the homeless person holding the sign, “Will work for food.” 2.) Next Sunday when you come for communion, bring a jar of peanut butter for those who are hungry in our community and would love the leftovers from our table. You will be invited to bring the peanut butter forward when you come to communion. Friends, as you touch the wounds of our broken world with the love of Christ, then you will know Jesus and believe.

Let us pray: Dearest God, breathe on us and blow open the tightly secured, alarmed and locked doors of our hearts and minds with the peace of Christ. Touch us with the healing power of your presence. Touch us through our doubts and our fears and empower us, scared as we sometimes might be, to venture forth from the safe confines of this sanctuary and into the world that you love. In the name of your son, Jesus, who was wounded for our sakes, we pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

I hope many of you were able to do your homework last week and get out your (blow on bible) Bible to read the book of Philippians. That is such an uplifting book of the Bible. This week's NT lesson is from the Gospel of John. It is after the death and crucifixion of Jesus. The disciples are disillusioned, dejected and devastated that the one they thought, they just knew, was the Messiah, was dead. They had heard rumors that Jesus had appeared to Mary Magdalene, but they didn't believe the idle tale of a woman. Peter had gone to Jesus' tomb and found it empty, but he really didn't understand. More than anything, the disciples are scared. They had been incriminated as disciples of Jesus and feared that the authorities were going to come after them next. So they gathered behind locked doors: listen to the Gospel story: John 20: 19-29

CHILDREN'S SERMON – TOUCHING THE WOUNDS

Have any of you ever skinned your knee? That can hurt! Have you ever broken a bone? That hurts a whole lot. Have any of you ever had any stitches? I think I need to pray for your parents!!

We have all had times when we have been hurt, haven't we. You know what I have found when I have been hurt? It always feels better when a friend or a parent or a teacher gives me a hug, or maybe kisses your boo-boo. It feels better because you know someone else cares. Do you know who seemed to care a lot about people who were hurting? Jesus did. He cared about those who were sick. He cared about anyone who was troubled. He healed a woman who was stooped over and could not stand up straight. He cared about the hurts, the wounds, the pain that others felt. And he cares about you and any hurt you ever experience as well.

And Jesus said that those of us who believe in him are to care about anyone who is hurting in our world. So next time you are playing with friends and someone scraps a knee – give them a hug and let them know you care. Or when you see a friend being made fun of at school, go and say a kind word and be a friend to them. You will be showing them the love of Jesus. And next time you get hurt and your mom or dad, a teacher or a friend hugs you and makes it feel better, know that is one way that Jesus is also loving you and letting you know how much he cares.

Dear God, thank you that you care when we get hurt. Help us to care for others. In Jesus' name. Amen

Pastor Yarelis will be going back to Cuba this week but before she leaves, she wants to give you something.