

**3/29/2020. "Wounded Healers". Zoom Lenten Worship Service**

**Isaiah 53:1-5. John 5:2-8**

**First United Church of Arvada Rev. Karin Kilpatric**

Right about the same time that novelist and playwright Thornton Wilder wrote his Pulitzer prize winning novel "The Bridge at San Luis Rey" (1927) he also wrote a short, little known play called, "The Angel That Troubled the Waters." It was about a miraculous pool where people waited for healing. In this play, Wilder used the background of the story from the Gospel of John in which sick and suffering people gathered at the healing pool at Bethesda. There was a common belief among them that once a year an angel would come to the pool and touch the water and that the first person to bathe in the pool after this angelic visitation would be healed of their infirmities.

Wilder's play opens with a scene showing a pool surrounded by crippled people, the blind and the sick-- invalids of all sorts who have come in the hope of being the first to bathe in the waters. But, now, among them, also waiting by the pool, we see an unlikely seeker of healing, a doctor, who appears to be healthy and fit. When the angel arrives, he listens to the Doctor's plea, "My work grows faint. Heal me, Long Expected One; heal me that I may continue. Renew, release; let me begin again without this fault that bears me down." The angel kneels by the pool with his finger poised above the water and replies, "Draw back Physician, this healing is not for you." But the doctor persists, "Surely, O, Prince, you are not deceived by my apparent wholeness. Your eyes can see the nets in which my wings are caught; the sin into which all my endeavors sink half-performed cannot be concealed from you." The doctor believes that his flaw interferes with his practice of medicine and his capacity to heal. The angel responds to his plea with this mysterious wisdom, "Without your wound where would your power be? It is your remorse that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as

can one human being broken in the wheels of living. In Love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve."

This almost paradoxical declaration contains a clear Lenten message. It is also a message suited well to the world's suffering people today across nations, cultures, religions, races, ages and genders in this time of Covid-19 and to the healing power of the medical professionals who care for them. These doctors, nurses and the entire medical staffs around them are the humble healing heroes of today. "In Love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve." The leaders that we see catching their breath and wiping a tear on camera, who speak of their concern for the people and show their dedication to their work, they are our healing heroes. They too, like the doctor in the story, make pleas to the better angels in the rest of us, leaders and citizens, to come to their aid with protection and with healing. Their "wings" are caught by the suddenness, unpredictability and dangerousness of this pandemic and the lack of resources which block their ability to give proper medical care--to do their best healing.

Each year in this season which leads up to Easter Sunday, we speak and sing and pray about the saving grace of Jesus' own woundedness; his betrayal, his beating and his death on a cross. It is a dark message and many of us resist spending too much time on it. Some feel that the focus on the woundedness of Christ in Lent invokes a self-destructive sense of guilt that results in the finger pointing of blame. Even the phrases that we use during Lent, such as "saved by the blood of the lamb" and "Christ bore the heavy cross for my soul," which emphasize the sacredness of Christ's wounds, are often used to evoke shame and blame and self-incrimination in us rather than to inspire awe at the power and courage of such self-less love. They emphasize what has been called "atonement theology," which sees Jesus first and foremost as a human sacrifice required to take away the sins of depraved humanity forever. This kind of thinking can too often lead to the conclusion that Jesus' death on the cross is all that matters, not his basic teachings of love and forgiveness and not our own love and

forgiveness--just that we are saved by an ancient atoning death and can now escape eternal damnation and go to heaven.

Let's look more closely at the word, atonement. This often narrowly understood word can be looked at quite differently, becoming the root of a profoundly beautiful image and experience. Say the word in separated syllables and it becomes at-one-ment. How different to imagine ourselves not as shameful sinners but as ones who seek the wholeness that comes from being "at one with" the Holy. Imagining a God, who would sacrifice his son, as expiation for the sins of humanity assumes a cruelty in God, that is hard for many of us to accept--to say nothing of the outdated notion of God as an all-powerful being who controls human beings like puppets on strings. At-one-ment imagines a loving and saving God with whom we feel intimacy.

Many of us spend a disproportionate amount of our time attempting to hide our wounded-ness or limitations. We build elaborate defenses around our secret insecurities and buried feelings of failure or inadequacy. Those in leadership often fear that others will see through their mask of strength which hides the trembling heart and confused human being beneath it. Doctors and nurses often secretly question their own capacity to comprehend the complex path of diseases in the workings of the human body in order to bring forth cures. Academics are frightened that someone will locate the boundary of their intellectual capacity and they will appear foolish and shallow. Parents, humbled by the questions and needs of their children, may wonder if they know what they are doing at all. Preachers know that in their hearts they are not as "good" as some people assume them to be and seem to need them to be. We all fight against our inferiorities, by attempting to hide our woundedness.

Yet, the angel in today's story, and the message given by Jesus over and over again in the Gospels is just the opposite. Our wounds can be the source of our greatest strengths. They can teach us and humble us, and motivate us to gain knowledge, find

courage, listen to others, and to hear and heed our own call to use the gifts we have been given to offer loving service. Most importantly we must face our wounds with courageous transparency if we are to gain access to our own spiritual life. Only then can our gratitude for Christ's willingness to be wounded inspire our own life in the spirit. We must recognize our darkness and our hurt, in order to find light and healing. We must not only acknowledge and accept our own wounds, but we must come to value them and to use them with sensitivity and compassion in service to the world around us.

Facing our own wounds is the task that each of us have been given to deal with and to transform in our short time here on this earth. This is the message which Christ's life brings to us in Lent—a message not just of Jesus shouldering our wounds but of a challenge to take up our own cross, (face our own wounds) and follow him. Now of course, our wounds should not be romanticized or over emphasized or we run the risk of developing a “victim mentality.” When we see ourselves as “victims” we begin to define ourselves by our problems and to wear our wounds like medals, parading around looking for sympathy or solace or someone to blame. Yet, the opposite perspective, the obstinate denial of our brokenness; the unwillingness to recognize our suffering or our failings will have a disastrous effect on human life. This kind of unconsciousness brings a life of frenetic busyness and a perpetual search for distractions to fill an emptiness we cannot admit. Or it can develop into a grandiosity, a “holier than thou, I have no issues” stance that is disrespectful of others' pain and can become quite thoughtless and harsh, even cruel. The metaphor of the oyster which transforms the irritating grit within its shell into a beautiful and valuable pearl is a simple one, and perhaps overused, but it is, nevertheless, a clarifying image given by the natural world.

Our own woundedness can give us a sacred capacity to serve our fellow human beings. In my position as the pastor of this church I am acutely aware of the personal suffering of the members of this congregation. I truly cannot think of one soul who has not suffered pain, loss, doubt, depression, and fear—who has not been wounded by life in

ways big and small. Yet, week after week for years these same folks gather to praise God, to pray, to learn, and to serve. Life has tenderized us to feel the pain of others and to care. We are a generous congregation with our giving and our hearts. We walk toward God's light not because we are beings of light only. We are also beings exposed to the dark of doubt and fear and selfishness and limitation. But when we open up to the light, we can, with our fellow shadowy human beings, together, carry the light into the world.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only son," John declared and continued, "Indeed, God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." And as Wilder's angel pronounced boldly, "The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as can one human being broken in the wheels of living. In Love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve.

"Without our wounds, where would our power be? Thanks be to God.

Let's now take a moment to pray for the medical professionals who are on the front line, facing the Covid-19 crises day after day. Let us pray for these healing heroes whose wings are caught in the net of this ravaging virus and offer our deepest gratitude for their self-less service to our families, our nation, and our world.

Morning Prayer:

Divine Source Who We Call by Many Names,

We ask today that in this time of anxiety and suffering around the world and in our nation, we can find solace and comfort in our prayers. We ask that we might gain wisdom in our own brokenness to be wounded soldiers in love's service to the world around us—to be conscious of the needs of others at this time; for shelter, food, and other basic necessities, for consoling or just conversation, for medical care and nursing

care. Help us see through new eyes opened by this crisis and the suffering of so many, how deeply we are connected and how much we need each other and you.

We pray for doctors and nurses and all those who serve in our hospitals. We pray for police and fire fighters, mail deliverers and grocery workers, those in military service, and public service. We pray for medical researchers seeking new treatments and vaccines. We pray for those whose economic hardship has been made even greater by the current economic situation. We pray for refugees. We pray for communities and schools and churches and non-profits who serve so humbly and faithfully. We pray for the safety and well being of the people of this congregation and for the most vulnerable people the world over.

We offer special prayers for all those whose names have been raised up, and for all those we hold in the silence of our hearts. We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray saying... Our Father....

Amen.

#### Benediction

At times like these our sight is dimmed, and we stumble about in the grey light of the world. At times like these, our carefully charted path is blocked, and we search the landscape before us for a sign we can trust. In Christ, God came as the light in the morning. God's Spirit illumines our path with eternal hope and provides the vision to take our next step into the future. Go in Peace. Amen.

#### Isaiah 53:1-5

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering<sup>a</sup> and acquainted with infirmity;

and as one from whom others hide their faces<sup>[b]</sup> he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

John 5:2-8

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew<sup>[</sup>Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” The sick man answered him, Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.”