

A NEW ANOINTING
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Based on Psalm 133 and John 20:26-29 (translations below). Thomas Touches the Wounds of Christ

Many years ago, when I was serving a congregation, whose building was located in an inner-city, the door to my office remained bolted shut.

Like the disciples hiding behind a locked door in our Gospel lesson for today, we who worked in that building at that time took extra care with our physical and spiritual safety.

A hotbed of drug trafficking along a major bus route came within one block of our church entrance. Subsidized housing on one side of the building collided with upscale Norman Rockwell version gentrification on the other. Blatant prostitution had declined by the time I arrived but was still lurking in the shadows.

Nearly every day a knock on the church office door would rouse us from our “work,” with a beloved child of God from the neighborhood standing at our doorstep: one among whom Jesus calls “the least of these my brothers and sisters.” Never literally saying, “Peace be with you,” but almost certainly inviting us in to *Shalom*: that deeper commitment in which Jesus calls us to live the reign of God “on earth as it is in heaven.”

One particular neighbor stands out in my memory. After assuring ourselves we need not be afraid, we invited this neighbor into the hallway. A leftover pew from the sanctuary served as a hospitality area. Our guest proceeded to ask for \$300, so he could rent a room near the church for a month.

We spent a long time talking with him. Listening to his story. Discerning there was no alcohol on his breath. But thinking he still seemed somewhat disoriented. Praying for wisdom in how to respond.

After trying to figure out what his support system might be, and realizing that he did have an option of staying with a friend if he wanted it, I finally said I could not give him the money, but I would be happy to buy him some lunch. It just so happened to be right around noon. He immediately agreed. We walked across the street to the local Indian Restaurant to partake of the lunchtime buffet.

He chose the chicken tikka masala. Piled his plate high with that really good bread they make at Indian restaurants. I ordered a mug of masala chai and asked him, “How is it with your soul?”

It did not take long for him to start sharing his mental illness history: an abusive childhood; alcoholic parents; in and out of foster care; schizophrenia; bipolar disorder.

I asked him if he was seeking treatment for his mental illness issues, and he said he does have access to psychotropic medication and a therapist, because of the Affordable Care Act. And he is grateful for that. As am I.

But then he started talking about how angry he is about the way his life has turned out. And that he sometimes turns that anger inward on himself, instead of releasing on the outside. And that he sometimes even thinks about ending his own life. I asked him if he felt that way in that moment. And he said no. But I was still concerned. So when we finished our food, I begged him to let me call a local shelter for him.

He refused. He said he would rather jump from one couch to the next night after night. And the truth is he would really rather have me give him \$300 so he could rent that room near the church for a month.

When I shook my head 'no' one last time, he said what he really wanted, even more than the money, was that he could be a Christian like me. So he would not have to take those pills anymore. So he would not have to struggle through those moments when he thought life was not worth it anymore.

My mouth dropped open when he said it. I was stunned by his heartfelt statement of desire for a faith that would heal him of such a deep wound. I was heartbroken by his desperate plea for a faith that would make us all 'well.'

And I was angry that somewhere along the way, this beautiful beloved child of God, deeply wounded by events he did not deserve, got the wrong message from John's Gospel lesson for today.

This beautiful beloved child of God had somehow picked up the notion that simply "believing" would cure his mental illness on the spot. And deliver him from what seemed to me to be quite justified despair, given the circumstances of his life.

The same way many of us are taught that simply "believing" the right "checklist of doctrines" passed down through history of this religion we have found ourselves in will send us straight to heaven.

Oh no, I said, to him and to the rest of us today, including the misnamed "Doubting Thomas" in our text. The journey of faith does not mean we just "believe the right thing" and are automatically exempt from mental illness. Or any other illness, for that matter. Or just plain awfulness in any part of our lives. Of "hell on earth," as too many of us live it.

The journey of faith does not mean we just "believe the right thing" and do not have to take the medication we are prescribed to tend our psychic wounds or the medication we are prescribed to tend any other kind of wound, including the spiritual wounds so many in our congregation carry from bad theology based on a bad translation of this passage from Scripture and far too many others.

The journey of faith does not mean that we do not have to fight like hell – just like everybody else – through far too many moments of despair we cannot seem to "believe: our way out of."

The journey of faith is more about *trust*, which is a much better translation of what Jesus is saying to Thomas in John's Gospel. In fact, every time you see the word "believe" in the New Testament, please replace it with "trust," because that is a more accurate translation of the first century Greek that is used in the Bible.

The journey of faith is not about "belief" at all. The journey of faith is about *trust*. The journey of faith, in the Christian context, means we trust a power greater than ourselves – whose name is Jesus – to walk right alongside us through whatever wounds scar us inwardly and outwardly. The journey of faith, in the Christian context, means that we trust that in the mystery of resurrection – which was never meant to be understood *rationally* in the first place! – Jesus has shown us how to overcome.

The journey of faith, in the Christian context, means that we cling to a hope – no matter how hopeless our lives can seem – that we, too, like Jesus, can claw our way out to the other side of those wounds. So that one day they just do not hurt as much anymore. And we can find the grace to keep going. And we become something entirely new. Like Jesus did. Like his disciples did. Like Thomas did.

This beautiful beloved child of God, this inner-city congregation's neighbor – who had become my spiritual mirror of the healing grace of God through the deep wounds of life – thought about what I had said, while he finished his chicken tikka masala and munched on those last little bites of Indian bread.

He never did let me call the homeless shelter on his behalf.

But he did say to me, as we walked out the door, that he felt better inside. A sense of peace, now that he had bared his soul to someone else. And that he was glad I had listened to his story. And that he thought maybe he could trust in a Jesus that would keep walking with him through the valley of the shadow that lay before him. And that he was really glad we were in it together. And that he hoped God would bless me, as my message had blessed him.

[Which of course God did. *Through* him. He blessed me far more than anything I could have offered in return.]

“Peace be with you,” Jesus says, as he finds his way through the bolted shut door of the disciples in our Lesson from John’s Gospel today. *Shalom* be with you: the reign of God be with you, on earth as it is in heaven.

“How sweet, how soothing it will be,” the Psalmist sings, when the family of God gathers in *Shalom*. That great day when all is well and we have finally and forever figured out how to live in justice and peace.

“How sweet, how soothing it will be,” the Psalmist sings, when the last have become first – and the first have become last – and it does not matter anymore because every creature on this planet has exactly what it needs. And our wounds don’t hurt anymore. And every manner of thing is *well*.

Like the oil of anointing, the Psalmist says it will be. Flowing over our heads and down our faces and garments. Like the waters of baptism blessing the never-ending Spirit of Life.

There is a longing in you and me for this “wellness.” There is a longing in the Psalmist and in Thomas for this *Shalom*. There is a longing in the neighbor of an inner city congregation for Peace to be with us all.

And there is a promise in our story from the words of ancient Scripture: Peace is already with you, in some mysterious way, Jesus says. Look at my hands, touch my side. See the wounds. They do not go away. But they do not have to hurt anymore.

Look. And trust, Jesus says. This promise is also for you. (And also for me.) And blessed are those who can trust without needing to look. This promise is also for them.

With the pressure comes the anointing, the author Zim Flores says. With the common meal comes the taste of the heavenly banquet, a congregation’s inner city neighbor implies. With our new anointing on this Second Sunday of Easter, Two Thousand Twenty One, we live in the trust that “all shall be well,” in the words of Julian of Norwich, “and all shall be well, and every manner of thing shall be well.”

Let the church say, Amen!

Psalm 133

A Song of Rising, by David

Behold! How sweet,
how soothing it will be

to gather together again!

Like precious oil flowing over the head,
running down the face –
ah, the face of God's people –
running down the edge of our garments!

Like dew from the mountain
descending upon God's holy place,
holy people –
God will bless the never-ending
spirit of Life!

John 20:26-29

A week after Easter
the disciples of Jesus
were again in the house,
and Thomas was with them.

[Thomas had not been with the disciples
when Jesus appeared on Easter.
In fact, Thomas had said to the others,
"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 trust."]

Although the doors were shut,
Jesus came and stood among them and said,
"Peace be with you."

Then he said to Thomas,
"Put your finger here and see my hands.
Reach out your hand and put it in my side.
Do not doubt but trust."

Thomas answered him,
"My Lord and my God!"

Jesus said to him,
"Have you trusted
because you have seen me?
Blessed are those who have not seen
and yet have come to trust."