

**BEHOLD!**  
“Welcome Back Sunday”  
August 21, 2016  
21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

*Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. (Luke 13:10-17)*

Today is that magical day of the year when the population of our tiny town explodes in the blink of an eye. It’s a miracle of sorts, if we choose to see it. I know, I know, parking spots just got scarce, the daily traffic jam at the 4-way is back, but so is the marvelous energy and diversity and powerful possibility that comes with a new school year, and whole new community of students.

This is why, here at SPC, we *celebrate* this day as “welcome back Sunday”—it’s a practice, really, intentional welcome, one we’ve been talking about a lot lately. *We choose welcome*, in many different ways, or, at least we try. So: welcome to all those who have been away, newcomers, old-timers, and those who are just passing through. And a special welcome to our college students, new and old, in here and out there—whether we realize it or not we simply cannot be fully who God is calling us to be without you. Please be sure to welcome each other this morning, and extend a special welcome to all the students you meet today and in the days to come.

And lets not forget to welcome ourselves to this holy place and gathering, to this uncluttered, wide open *present moment, wonderful moment* as Buddhist teacher Thich Naht Hahn loves to say. Breathe, and welcome: body, mind and heart.

We welcome one and all to this house of prayer and school of love. Its true, at our best, we at SPC are perpetual students very much like the young folks just down the road. I know this especially well, because I have the privilege of working both sides of town, adult education and formation here, and Connections @ Shepherd University, our campus outreach program which is entering (I do believe) its 9<sup>th</sup> year—thanks to the generous support of this congregation and the Westminster Foundation of WV.

This whole emphasis on education, by the way, is a clear distinctive of Presbyterian tradition; there’s a reason we sit surrounded by teachers and other public servants. John Calvin, founding figure of Reformed tradition, promoted the radical notion of universal literacy, all the way back in 16<sup>th</sup> century Geneva. And Calvin, an impeccably educated lawyer (not a priest), was quite clear that knowledge is not just about intellectual acquisition; at its fullest and deepest it is also a movement of the heart, and a means of transformation. The whole notion that spirituality and education are somehow in conflict, is a destructive contemporary falsehood promoted by fundamentalists in both religion and the academy.

Jesus, by the way, was also a teacher, as our story today reminds us. He was a wisdom teacher, to be more specific, whose primary focus is “first and foremost the path of inner transformation... from animal instincts and egocentricity into love and compassion; from a judgmental and dualistic worldview into a nondual acceptingness” this according to spiritual teacher Cynthia Bourgeault. This “places Jesus” she goes on “in a stream of living wisdom that has been flowing through the human condition for at least five thousand years.” Has been, and is still, flowing everywhere—which is why welcoming the wisdom of the world—from all the

deep spiritual traditions, from science, and history and all forms of human discovery--is so vital for us today. We need all the wisdom we can get.

In our story today, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue. We're not told the subject, what we are told is this: Jesus is teaching. Jesus sees a woman. And he sees the spirit that has crippled her for eighteen years. He sees. Perceives deeply. The Greek word can also be translated: **behold** (echoes of that angelic invitation at the beginning of this Gospel: "Behold! Do not be afraid. I bring you good news.") Jesus beholds the woman, and declares the good news to her: "you are set free" or, more accurately: you have been freed. The verb here implies something that has already happened, and perhaps invites us to consider: what keeps us in bondage? what do we need to claim or release, to realize our freedom?

This summer we've been reading a different kind of wisdom story in the remarkable book *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* by Fr. Gregory Boyle. If you haven't read it yet, I recommend that you do. It's a series of stories, about Boyle's experiences working with gang members on the ultra violent streets of LA, stories that are permeated with the quiet genius this man embodies, for beholding the wholeness in profoundly broken people and situations, stories radiant with hope right in the midst of heartbreak.

One of my favorites is the story of Ramiro, who comes to Boyle fresh out of prison, with this history of anger, violence and dysfunction, and all Boyle sees a precious child of God, despite the prison tattoo that fills Ramiro's forehead, screaming (and I paraphrase): "Eff the world." Just pause, and picture that for one second.

Boyle writes: "He told me his job search was not going so great. I'm only imagining him at McDonald's: "Do you want fries with that?" and seeing mothers grab their kids, fleeing the store. So I hired him at the bakery, and little by little we erased his forehead. We have since added many laser machines and doctors who perform more than four thousand treatments a year. We owe it all to Ramiro who moved on to a job as a security guard at a movie studio—no trace left of the angriest moment in his life."

Ramiro comes to Boyle so broken and wounded that he screams it at the world; and Boyle manages to see the wholeness underneath, and he helps Ramiro reclaim it. But in the process Boyle discovers whole new possibilities for himself and those around him—today among many other things, Fr. Boyle runs the largest tattoo removal service in the entire world.

This book, and its hope-infused vision of compassion and kinship, what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Beloved Community, will be the grounding for our fall seminar series on the topic of race, privilege and faith. In case you hadn't noticed we are swimming in a toxic sea these days, whose origins most of us do not begin to really understand. Jim Wallis in his excellent book *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege and the Bridge to a New America*—another resource I highly recommend—insists that we are not just witnessing a political crisis, we are suffering an acute spiritual one. "We the people" are crippled by the ancient sin of racism, so the way toward healing, must include repentance, which is another way of saying transformation of hearts and minds. We must therefore move beyond politics, partisanship, blame and name calling and toward a full-bodied spiritual and moral transformation. Changing laws and institutions is necessary and insufficient. We must see, name, expose and understand the sin in seeking its transformation. To put it more simply, we need to wake up, to see with clear eyes what's really going on, and has been going on, around us and within us, for a very long time. Only then can we hope to be free.

All kinds of education is needed. And is happening all around us, including on the Shepherd campus where the fall common reading project is *Just Mercy* a book about race and our broken criminal justice system, which is also on our fall discussion list. But in this school of love, we

bring particular perspectives and prescriptives, because our curriculum is grounded in deep wisdom. Our great ancestors, for example, tell us first and foremost to look around at world because: *Behold, it is good*. Incomplete, distorted, disfigured but still fundamentally good. Furthermore, the human part of creation is not just good, it is very good because the human one is made in the image of the Divine. Male, female, black, white, brown, Muslim, atheist, narcissist, saint, gay, straight, trans and none of the above—all created in God's image. Made by love, in love, for love, which is to say, created for relationship, wholeness and freedom. Anything that demeans, denies or destroys these, conscious or not, cripples everyone. And finally, that creative spirit of love is present in all things, even the deepest darkness, and is calling us always toward greater wholeness and healing. And we connect with that Spirit through prayer – all the practices of listening, loving, lament, and dreaming with God--which softens our hearts, renews our hope, sharpens our vision and empowers our love for the world. And all of this – looking, learning, listening--we do together, in community, where the whole is so much more powerful than all the individual parts.

Wisdom, practice, community—these are the particular gifts of a school of love, gifts that help equip us for the journey of healing that always before us. So I hope you will all choose to join in this particular journey in some way—through reading and study, through conversation, through community, through prayer, beginning with this prayer of welcome from Thomas Keating:

    Welcome, welcome, welcome.  
    I welcome everything that comes to me today  
        because I know it's for my healing.  
    I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons,  
        situations, and conditions.  
    I let go of my desire for control and security.  
    I let go of my desire for approval and pleasure.  
    I let go of my desire to change any situation, person or myself.  
    I open to the love and presence of God and  
        God's action within. Welcome.

Amen