

Sermon for April 11, 2021

Over the years, I have been challenged regarding the traditional paradigm of redemption, one that moves from death to life without remainder. To put it another way, the idea that redemption moves in a linear fashion from brokenness toward victory over death, evil and suffering and glosses over the way the trauma of death continues, or remains, in the midst of life. Traditional understandings of redemption advise people to “get over it” or to move on, but those who have suffered trauma find such advice unhelpful. For some, the reality of death continues to impinge on life, and there is no clean break with the trauma of the past. In other words, some people find it difficult to move directly from Good Friday to Easter. Some of us get stuck and are not sure what Easter means when wounds remain. How can we sing ‘Hallelujah’ when wounds remain?

Moreover, such questions about trauma coincide with a perennial quandary of the Christian faith: If salvation has been accomplished in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, why is there so little peace on earth? Why do we live in the grip of so much anger, evoked by conflicts that mar our family, work and communal environments, or by the interminable warfare that marks our era? Why do we find ourselves paralyzed by fears and chronic anxieties that deflate our sense of worth, making simple acts of compassion - - of connection with others - - difficult? Why do such debilitating realities remain, even as we proclaim that Jesus has been raised, that death has been defeated and that victory has been won?

In the text for today, the Gospel of John's account of the risen Lord's appearance to His disciples, the wounds of crucifixion are on full display. They are not erased by resurrection. Indeed, Jesus directs the disciples attention to the wounds: "He showed them His hands and side". In light of Jesus' attention to wounds, we may reenvision the meaning of resurrection by locating its power in confronting, attending to and mindfully transforming rather than erasing wounds.

In our current context, wounds in need of attention are myriad. Think of the number of people who have lost loved ones to a deadly pandemic and the grief engulfing them, compounded by the pain of separation and isolation. Moreover, the pandemic has exposed deep racial wounds in the fabric of our lives, as well as an ever-widening socio-economic gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots." Think also of the recurring trauma of mass shootings, that continues to terrorize our nation. Facing into such wounds is essential if we are to be an Easter people who engage, rather than ignore, the death-tending realities of our world and bear witness to resurrection life.

We shall make a distinction here between what we shall call dirty pain and clean pain. Dirty pain entails avoidance, blame and denial when confronted with realities such as racism or oppression. When people respond from their most wounded parts, they become cruel or violent, or emotionally run away, they experience dirty pain. By the way of contrast, clean pain enables our bodies to heal and find the means to address white-body supremacy. Accepting clean pain will allow white Americans to confront their longtime collective disassociation and silence. It will enable

African-Americans to confront their internalization of defectiveness and self-hate. And it will help public safety professionals in many localities to confront the recent metamorphosis of their role from serving the community to serving as soldiers and prison guards.

Most certainly, Christian communities can be places of resurrection where clean pain replaces the dirty pain of avoidance - - places where these and other wounds are touched, attended to, released, liberated and redeemed. Places where anger, fear, agitation, grief and loss are acknowledged and addressed, where anger is transformed into compassion for those who are hurting and where energies are refocused to address injustice. Places where fear is transformed into interconnection that enables us to see that where one is wounded, all are wounded, and that injustice to one is injustice to all. Grief and loss can forge communities of care and compassion, tenderness and courage. In all of these respects, the church is a place of respite, not because we retreat there to ignore wounds, but because it is a place where a risen Lord directs our attention to them, and breathes His Spirit into us, empowering us for healing ministries in His name.

Amen and Amen!