

“Wounds, Scabs, and Scars”

August 21, 2016

Starting Over, Digging Deeper series

These words from the prophet Isaiah in chapter 53 are usually read on Good Friday. This is one of the Servant Songs in Isaiah - a word about the Messiah who would bring salvation to the world.

For us who claim the Christian faith, Isaiah's words are a reflection on who Jesus is and what he does on the cross. We remember Jesus' sacrifice for us - that he bore the weight and pain of our sin. And we hear that mysterious paradox - by his wounds we are healed. His love never stopped - even unto death. And even then, death couldn't stop his love!

But most of us would like to skip over the wounds of Good Friday, and some of us do! We celebrate on Palm Sunday before hearing about the cross, and then again on Easter Sunday when Jesus' wounds are scars. We don't take the time to reflect on what happened and why. We are sinners. We can't save ourselves. God's love is bigger than our screw-ups. That's all true, but we don't like to talk about it.

We try to hide from God. We try to cover the wounds we've endured. We don't want to talk to each other about how we've sinned and fallen short of what God intends for us. And yet, when we come together, we confess and repent - and we celebrate God's forgiveness.

But living our faith in Jesus isn't so easy. We carry a lot of heavy stuff with us: shame, guilt, struggle, regret, and grief. We cry out to God about our wounded and broken world, but the truth is that we're a part of it. We carry wounds with us, too. Jefferson Bethke says, "We don't hide scars as we do wounds. Wounds we cover, we mask, we make sure no one can see or touch. Scars are the opposite. We aren't afraid to show our scars because they tell a story."

Bethke writes about Jesus' invitation to bring our wounds to him. He says that Jesus wants to turn our wounds into scars. Jesus invites you and me to bring our whole lives to him so that he might offer us healing and wholeness. We'll still have the scars, but what was once a wound doesn't hurt anymore. Jesus heals and frees us.

Jesus is with us always - in those moments when we've sinned against God and each other, when we've hurt others, when we've thought less of ourselves and struggled to believe God really loves us. And as difficult as it is to understand, Jesus is with us in those moments when we've been hurt by others - not willing it to happen, but standing with us in the midst of our humanity.

But it's so hard to let go of those wounds. It's so hard to expose them to anyone - let alone to Jesus. Perhaps we struggle to believe that we don't have to be defined by our past. Our past is a part of us. It's a part of who we are, but it's not all that we are.

Maybe some of us don't feel like we have much of a past, but all of us have regrets. We've said or done something we wish we hadn't. Or we didn't do something, but wish we could go back and make it right. But living our faith means that we can stand boldly before God and others and claim the truth that we're not defined by our past. We've stepped into a future with God.

When we allow Jesus to bring healing to our lives, we become strong witnesses for who he is and what he can do. Today you can take a piece of driftwood that has been tossed and turned - and remade by the power of water and nature. Some of the pieces are so smooth even after having rough edges. They are scarred and beautiful. They are a reminder of how God works in us to bring something new and beautiful.

When I think about the power of Jesus to bring new life and hope, I think of a woman I met a few years ago. She called me at home one afternoon asking about being baptized. That doesn't happen very often. I was surprised and asked her if she had a church. She said she'd been in an online faith community. I invited her to come to my office so that we could talk. She came in soon after, and I learned of her story.

She was clean and sober after many years of drug addiction. She had been in jail. She had been sexually assaulted. She struggled with mental illness and family problems. She had other struggles, but in her own words, she was a miracle. God had worked in her life and brought her through, and she was thankful. She wanted to be baptized.

She was unsure about coming to church with a lot of other people. She struggled with anxiety and wasn't sure about being in a crowd, but she came to worship and was welcomed warmly.

It was a few weeks later when I had the privilege and joy of standing at the baptismal font, praying over the water, and touching her head with the water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit - and to tell her to live in God's grace all the days of her life. Not everyone knew her story like I did, but it was one of those moments when heaven and earth came crashing together. It was a joy to see her witness to God's love in her life!

But that wasn't the end. She had been a part of our worship service that was a smaller and more intimate setting. One Sunday, she came downstairs to find me when folks from the other service were mingling. She wasn't used to being in that bigger crowd. She wasn't dressed up at all, and she told me that she felt like people might think she was out of place because of the way she was dressed and because of the tattoos that covered her arms.

In my attempt to use my best pastoral care skills to calm her and assure her that it would be okay, I said something like, "Well, Jesus doesn't care. I'm sure he had tattoos, too." I really didn't mean it to be flippant comment. I just wasn't sure what to say to reassure.

But what she said next...now hear this because her response came immediately. She said, "Well, he did have scars." You have knocked me over with a feather. She got it. She knew it.

Friends, this happened years ago, and I still remember how I felt when she said those words. It was like a jolt of electricity in my soul! For all of the moments when I'd taken for granted what Isaiah said about the Messiah - the One whose wounds bring healing to you and me, this woman who called me on the phone about baptism, this woman who was so hesitant about coming to church, this woman whose life was so different than mine and whose story was so different than mine, this woman was and still is for me a witness to the deep, deep love of Jesus.

She knew that he had endured wounds for her and that those wounds were scars that showed his love to the world. And she had given her wounds to him and accepted his grace for herself and still had scars to share the story of what he had done for her.

That encounter still holds a lot of power for me. It was a moment of conviction and challenge for me - and a moment when I understood that truly it was Jesus who is the Healer. It's not me. It's not you. It's Jesus.

Even though we might struggle with healing and what it means, I want to be clear that when we talk about healing prayer, we're not necessarily talking about cure. Healing is sometimes misconstrued by those who exploit God's power for personal gain. Healing doesn't come from us or through us or because of us. Healing comes in many ways, and God works through medical professionals and others to bring healing. Healing comes from God. We simply participate in it by God's grace.

When we talk about praying for healing for someone, we're asking God to be God - for God to be a source of strength and help, for God to be a powerful presence and stronghold, for God's wisdom to be with us, for God's grace and love to be shown through God's people.

My own experience of healing prayer wasn't someone healing me or taking away the problems I was facing. It was Jesus' power coming through to bring healing, wholeness, and most of all - hope and peace at a time when I needed it desperately.

Healing prayers don't promise that everything will get better right now, but they remind us to be faithful to the Good News. As Daniel Benedict says, healing prayer "bridges alienation, swallows isolation, breaks suffering, and open discouraged human spirits." It's powerful.

We have that opportunity today—to receive healing prayer as a symbol of God’s love in Jesus Christ. After we sing and after the blessing, I’ll remain here at the altar for anyone who wants to receive healing prayer.

You may offer a specific prayer request - or you may simply come forward and say “unspoken.” I’ll offer anointing with oil. You can receive oil on your forehead or on your hand as a sign of God’s grace.

I don’t pretend that this prayer time will take away the things we deal with everyday. But we do believe that God is with us, helping us to deal with the everyday. We believe that God’s will for us is to be whole persons—called to go on the journey of faith toward holiness of heart and life.

Whether you come to receive prayer or not, reflect on where you need healing in your life. Take some time today or this week to do a spiritual wellness checkup. God knows your pain, even if you’ve never spoken about it. God knows you because you are God’s beloved child.

Pray for God’s healing in your life—in personal struggles and temptations, in broken relationships with those you’ve hurt and those who’ve hurt you, from emotional pain that you’ve carried, from the obstacles you’ve placed that work against spiritual wholeness. Pray for God’s healing - whether you’re dealing with a chronic health problem or something recently discovered. Pray for God’s healing - maybe you just feel “out of sync” with God and need encouragement. Maybe it’s deeper than you can explain. God knows it.

Whatever it is - physical, emotional, or spiritual, God is present and hears us. Praying for healing are not about doing something or claiming that everything will be better – it’s about receiving the grace of God and putting our hope in God.

I’d invite you to join me in prayer: Almighty God, compassionate One who comes to us in Jesus and is with us by the power of the Holy Spirit, bless this oil that we who receive it in faith would be made whole and the fullness of your joy. And I would pray for your compassion to show through in our prayers. Amen.