

Mind, Body, Spirit, Voice: Sacred Vulnerability

A Sermon for University Congregational Church

Sunday, November 11, 2018

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Traditional Word

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. Romans 12:4-8 NRSV

Contemporary Word

“Vulnerability is the only authentic state. Being vulnerable means being open, for wounding, but also for pleasure. Being open to the wounds of life means also being open to the bounty and beauty. Don’t mask or deny your vulnerability: it is your greatest asset. Be vulnerable: quake and shake in your boots with it—the new goodness that is coming to you, in the form of people, situations, and things can only come to you when you are vulnerable and open.” Stephen Russell

Michael: In 2013, suicide took the lives of 41,149 people in the United States alone. Depression affects 25 million people in the USA and 350 million people worldwide. Composer Jake Runestad wrote

the song we are about to sing “Please Stay” as an anthem for hope—an attempt to help destigmatize mental illness and challenge all of us to support those of us who are battling depression and thoughts of suicide. The quotes within the song are adapted from the Twitter account entitled “I Kept Living”, a platform for individuals to express why they chose life. Hope is real. Help is real. You are breath, you are life, you are beauty, you are light. Your story is not over. You are not a burden to anyone. Please stay. Just stay.

Choir: “Please Stay” (Robin and Paul will recite the lines found on page 8 beginning with Paul and alternating one by one. Robin should begin the following section over the last note of the song as the choir silently sits.)

Robin: “Vulnerability is the only authentic state. Being vulnerable means being open, for wounding, but also for pleasure. Being open to the wounds of life means also being open to the bounty and beauty. Don’t mask or deny your vulnerability: it is your greatest asset. Be vulnerable: quake and shake in your boots with it--the new goodness that is coming to you, in the form of people, situations, and things can only come to you when you are vulnerable and open.”

Paul: When God chose to come to earth in human form as Jesus of Nazareth, that meant that God was going to experience everything that a mortal experiences—pain and pleasure, anguish and joy, hunger and thirst and also satiety. It must be nice to have the ability to be in that position, right? None of us get to decide to be here. We just show up one day and start these incredible journeys... our lives. The new topic of our sermon series on God’s justice centers on the mind, body, spirit, voice connection and how all of these work towards creating a whole person. Now this is a very broad topic—mind, body, spirit, voice—and there is no way I can touch on each of these pieces in our brief time together this morning— so today we are looking at mental health and it’s part in the mind, body, spirit, voice

connection. In particular we're exploring depression and how that can sometimes lead someone to take their life. To help us with the biblical and ethical foundation for our work on the morality of "staying alive" that we need to spend a little time with the concept of the incarnation of God. The making of the word God flesh.

So how do we mere mortals understand this difficult theological concept—this idea that an omnipotent deity would choose to come and live among us—the mortal created. Soren Kierkegaard has a story that he would tell that helps us understand this difficult proposition:

Once upon a time there was a very rich but unhappy king, unhappy because he was all alone in an empty palace. How he longed for a wife with whom he could share his life.

Then one day the king saw the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, riding through the streets. Enquiries revealed she was a peasant girl, but the king's heart was captivated. He would make sure that each day he rode past her house in the hope of catching a glimpse of his love.

But the king had a problem--How would he win her love. He could draw up a royal decree commanding her to become his queen. But then he could never be sure he had won her love, for she would be required to obey a royal decree. Perhaps he could call on her and try to win her over, appear in all his regal glory and sweep her off her feet. But no, then he could never be sure whether she had married him only for his power and riches.

Finally he came upon the perfect plan. He would come to her as a peasant. That was the only way to truly win her love. So he abandoned his palace and his riches and his comfort and put on the clothes of a peasant. He went and lived among the peasants. He worked with them, shared their sufferings, danced at their feasts, until finally he won the heart of the woman who had captured his.

So it is with God. God became one of us, lived among us, worked among us, suffered with us, and danced with us. All in order to win our hearts.

I've always liked this story because it shows us that an all-powerful God needed to become vulnerable, needed to encounter pain and mortality, in order to better know us. To me, this is what the theology of the incarnation is really about: God's desire for us to better love God and for God to better love us. This is my theology of the heart—the belief that love is the greatest power in the universe and that love is where God actually resides.

Recently one of our church members and I were discussing why some people are unable to feel empathy for certain groups of human beings. We were trying to better understand how someone can get so hardened to the suffering of others that they dehumanize them and reject their humanity. This church member looked at me and said—it's probably a matter of vicinity. If you've never held a dying child, dying because they lacked the basic immunization for tetanus, if you've never been in the vicinity of such great suffering, then your heart never opens. You never get the sacred opportunity to become vulnerable to the great passion of life. He told me when his wife held that dying child, she opened her heart to the tragedy of his short life and death, she anguished with the family, and she became a changed human. Once you open your heart to the sacred vulnerability of compassion you change. You become a new person with new eyes and a new burden—because you can never go back. This is a *living* theology of the heart. Treating each person you encounter as a sacred reflection of God.

Henri Nouwen was a spiritual thinker, a synthesist and one of the first in our time to consciously develop a "theology of the heart" and to show us this as a template for both clergy and lay persons. Nouwen had an unusual capacity to write about the life of Jesus and the love of God in ways that have inspired countless people to trust God more fully.

He showed, and continues to show, a generation of ministers, teachers and seekers how one's gifts are to be placed at the service of those whom God places in our path. He gives us a model for building the kinds of relationships and communities that will allow each person to find his or her personal mission.

Nouwen always stressed the relational—how you treat me and I treat you. He writes very directly about our contemporary longings for meaning, belonging, and intimacy and, at the same time, integrates this with a powerful vision of service and God's justice. Fr. Nouwen often used the three core themes of solitude, community, and compassion to help people enter into a fresh vision of the spiritual life. He wrote: *"I believe you can look at solitude, community, and ministry as three disciplines by which we create space for God. If we create space in which God can act and speak, something surprising will happen. You and I are called to these disciplines if we want to be disciples."*

So, then, it is in the life of Jesus of Nazareth that we get our Christian ideal for the template of a life of solitude, community and compassion. Paul reminded us of these three things and how we are to emulate them in our own lives, as followers of Jesus. He wrote in his letter to the Romans that: For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function,⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith;⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching;⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. Paul is showing us that the embodiment of the entire church relies on the strengths of each other. Our own strength in solitude, in community and then in compassion.

Famed spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle has spent his entire life helping other people live better lives. At its core, it seems his work is deeply concerned with our minds and how they trap us into habits and behaviors that are not life-giving and in fact, can sometimes lead a person to take their own life. In his book, *The Power of Now*, he gives us a useful example of how we are not our minds. Let that sink in for

just a second. You are not your mind. We need to remember that our brains are organs, not unlike other organs in our bodies. And they are just as susceptible to illness as any other organ—it's just that we've create a stigma surrounding mental illness and treat it as some kind of moral failing, when it's not. You are NOT your mind. It just happens to be that this organ synthesizes all of this sensory information we receive and helps us function in the world—but it also holds onto our memories—the things that make us who we are as individuals. And it is our memories that keep us stuck in the past—often a past that never really was, but that we've built up over the years into something else.

What if our brains are trying to harm us—keeping us stuck? Eckhart Tolle writes this about how brains work: “The pain that you create now is always some form of nonacceptance, some form of unconscious resistance to what is. On the level of thought, the resistance is some form of judgment. On the emotional level, it is some form of negativity. The intensity of the pain depends on the degree of resistance to the present moment, and this in turn depends on how strongly you are identified with your mind. The mind always seeks to deny the Now and to escape from it. In other words, the more you are identified with your mind, the more you suffer. Or you may put it like this: the more you are able to honor and accept the *Now*, the more you are free of pain, of suffering - and free of the ego-controlled mind. Why does the mind habitually deny or resist the *Now*? Because it cannot function and remain in control without time, which is past and future, so it perceives the timeless *Now* as threatening. Time and mind are in fact inseparable.” Tolle is trying to get us to understand that regret for the past and anxiety about the future conspire to keep us from focusing on the *Now*—on the people and situations God has placed in our paths. We spend so much time and energy lamenting “why can't things be like they used to be?” “Oh it was so much better when...you fill in the blank” or think of all of the time and energy spent worrying: “What if we don't make this goal?” “What if I don't like the next thing I hear” or “what if the wolves come in the front door...what if” Our brains are wired through years of evolution to do these two things because our survival depended on it. We had to remember what killed our people in the past

and we had to plan for what might kill our people in the future. But—we're not in that context anymore. We can use our conscious minds to focus on what is happening right now—here—in front of each of us.

Every time we put ourselves out in the world, we are open to sacred vulnerability. Students and other performers—that audition that you thought went so well and yet you failed to land the big part—that's incredible pain, believe me, I know. I've felt it my entire performing life; jobseekers who were sure they nailed that interview only to be denied the job—rejection like that stings deeply; when we think we've found that great love and yet, our love is not returned—pain that some of us never get over; and when we offer words of hope and are met with words of scorn and scolding—it hurts—it hurts deeply—I think we should be deeply concerned anytime it DOESN'T hurt; when we open ourselves to right relationship we also open ourselves for sacred wounding...and this is what it means to be truly alive. I believe that when people close themselves off, because of past hurts and a fear of being vulnerable again, or closed off with an anxiety about the future that we can't even begin to consider the present moment-- I believe this is where some of our mental issues begin. We close off from people we love, we begin to stop participating in life in ways that we used to, and we become paralyzed with fear. I want to remind everyone gathered here this morning that Robin and I are trained to help you if you should ever find yourself stuck in this type of despair. We know how to get you the help you need. Please reach out. If you'd rather not talk with us, call Heidi or Valerie in the church office and they can connect you, privately, with one of our trained Stephen Ministers. Students in the choir—reach out to Dr. Hanawalt or one of your other professors—there are resources to help you through those dark periods of life. We all experience sadness and despair—it's part of being human—but it's how we respond to those moments in our lives that can make all of the difference. I especially want to mention that on this day, Veteran's Day, that over six thousand, five hundred former members of the military kill themselves each year. If you have someone in the military in your life, reach out to them today and see how they're doing.

When I put the search terms, mind, body, spirit, voice into Google while researching material for this sermon, the very first link was to a website about a fascinating woman, Helen Hubbert Kemp. There I found the music to the choral call-to-worship that was sung just a few minutes ago at the beginning of worship: Mind, Body, Spirit, Voice it takes a whole person to sing and rejoice. This song was written by famed composer Thomas Lloyd in honor of the retirement of Helen Kemp as the co-founder of the Singing for Seniors Program of the Bucks County Choral Society. As I read more about the life of this singular woman, I learned that Helen Kemp embodied those qualities that help keep us engaged with the world around. Helen not only had a remarkable career training church music directors of both adults and children, but she also continued this work well into her retirement, providing music programs in her last years at her care home. Helen was an internationally known teacher of choral conducting and was apparently beloved by most everyone she ever met. Her obituary from August of 2014 is filled with entry after entry of ways that Helen engaged with the world. She was always present in the world, even when she didn't feel like it. Helen is a shining example to us of a life lived in sacred vulnerability—you can't do the work of choral conducting without a deep appreciation for the pain of being human.

A few days ago there was a Dear Abby column that spoke to me about today's topic: "DEAR ABBY: I read that there is a suicide somewhere in the world every 40 seconds. Numbers rise at holiday time. Feeling like a child whose nose is pressed against a window, seeing others from the outside as they enjoy the warmth of the moment, can lead to thoughts of abandonment and despair. That's why I have a mission - - I set an extra place at my table.

I can attest that it works. One year I announced in church that my home would be open to anyone who didn't have a family. A woman came forward and accepted my invitation. We spent the day getting to know each other and bonded in friendship.

Please encourage your readers to set an extra place at their holiday table. My brother committed suicide. I move forward in his honor". – Signed FULL OF GRATITUDE IN PHOENIX

DEAR FULL OF GRATITUDE: "Please accept my sympathy for the tragic loss of your brother. I'm pleased to help spread the word. Isolation can be a killer, and inclusion can be a lifesaver. Bless you for what you are doing. I hope other readers will consider it and follow your example." There's an idea for each of us this coming holiday season? Perhaps?

Mind, body, spirit, voice. A holistic approach to our being. Our minds and bodies nourished and hopefully healthy. Our spirits refreshed here at church each week, in fact, did you know that church attendance is good for you? A Vanderbilt University research study from last year conclusively shows increased attendance at worship services is associated with less stress and enhanced longevity. So come to church and be healthy! Or at least find a way to nourish your soul. We can use the image of Jesus, meditating in the garden, as an image of solitude—one that we might emulate. We can use the memory of his interactions with the poor and despised, or how he created his disciples, as images of community and we can build on that, as surely as we are building our church here and now, and then, too, we can use his transformative teachings on compassion to help us change our hearts from hardened ones—hardened to each other and to ourselves—we can allow our spirits to open, vulnerable hearts that allow themselves to love and yes, to possibly get wounded—to be open for the heart breaking-anguish of being alive—to remind us of our humanity and the shared humanity of everyone around us. If we can get ourselves into the practice of encountering God in each individual we interact with AND if we can see that same God-ness in ourselves, perhaps we'll be a bit gentler with each other—a little bit kinder with ourselves—and we'll allow ourselves the sacred vulnerability of really being alive--of experiencing everything good (and yes sometimes bad) thing there for us in the present moment. That's incarnation—that's Emmanuel—God with us. When we open ourselves up to sacred vulnerability we allow ourselves to better experience God in our midst. And maybe, that might just be enough to keep us

going. To help us to stay. And in that dark night of the soul, when we start to think anguished thoughts of worry, pain and death, we can remind ourselves—we are not our minds-- that this will pass. Please. Stay. Present in each moment, open to whatever life has in store for us. May it be good. AMEN

Please stand if you are able as we hear again the words of Helen Kemp sung by our choir.

Resources

Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version

<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/840520-the-power-of-now>

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/vulnerability>

<https://henrinouwen.org/about/about-henri/his-spirituality/>

<https://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/incarnation/>

<https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2017/05/31/worship-is-good-for-your-health-vanderbilt-study/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17Ywn3ImcYE>