**“After the Rain: Healing”**

**A Sermon for University Congregational Church**

**Sunday, May 15, 2022**

**Rev. Paul Ellis Jackson**

Traditional Word

21 Since my people are crushed, I am crushed;

I mourn, and horror grips me.

22 Is there no balm in Gilead?

Is there no physician there?

Why then is there no healing

for the wound of my people?

9 [a]1 Oh, that my head were a spring of water

and my eyes a fountain of tears!

I would weep day and night

for the slain of my people. -- Jeremiah 8:21-22 to 9:1 NIV

Contemporary Word

“No relationship is perfect, and they aren’t all worth repair, but finding the discernment to push through and gain insight from our experiences and connections can be where we find the depths of what we can withstand and overcome.”

--Alexandre Elle, *After the Rain*

We have three dogs. Three wild beasts that run with crazed abandon through our home—well, at least when either Duane or I come home, and then things calm down pretty quickly when they discover we didn’t bring them any treats. One night this week, Duane remarked that Grover, our big, lovable 90-pound mutt, no longer had scabs on his head—where he had scratched so hard as to break the skin while we waited for his allergy shot to take effect. And it seems the allergy shot worked because he stopped messing with the scabs long enough that they began to heal. And now, with time and some medicine, the beast is better. Grover sleeps through the night again, no small feat for an older dog in a new house. He’s back to his old ways of being a big love AND eating every single unprotected roll of toilet paper he can find. Ingrate.

All it took for Grover’s itches to heal was a little time and some medicine—both balms to the body and the spirit. And time and medicine are good for us all, even us mere humans when we need some healing. When we ache, we take some medicine, give it time to work, and usually feel better. I believe this applies to our relationships as well. Sometimes our relationships are strained and even broken, and when that happens, sometimes we can repair the relationship with a bit of time and a little medicine. In this case, the medicine being love. And we can take it one step further and apply the same balm when our relationship, our sacred covenant with the Holy One, is broken.

Let’s use our covenant here at UCC as an example. We clearly state that when we join this congregation, we will journey together using the Ways of Jesus as our guide. And, on occasion, almost always unintentionally, because we are human, we do things that damage that relationship—between God and among ourselves. And we usually know when we’ve done that because we have a gut reaction. Now, we’ve given this reaction a psychological name when I believe it is a spiritual condition—we are bothered by our conscience. We are reminded that what we did was wrong—we can’t sync up the event that happened, the crisis that damaged the relationship with how we wish to be in the world. We failed to journey in the Ways of Jesus. So, what happens when an entire community damages its covenant with the Holy One? Well, I’m glad you asked…

The story of the Jewish people seems to be one of never-ending conflict—of victory and submission—of multiple diasporas that saw their people flung to the ends of the earth as if the seeds of a dandelion. Most of the earliest stories recorded by the Hebrew people came from their time spent enslaved by the Babylonians, who had destroyed their kingdom and taken their people to exile. The prophet Jeremiah calls attention to this Babylonian Exile in many places in his book, but there is one passage that is possibly a lament from a first-person account of the destruction of the Temple in 586 when Babylon destroyed the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Hear now these words from the prophet Jeremiah that caught my eye:

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I mourn, and horror grips me.

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Is there no balm in Gilead? Meaning: does not the Holy One have a way to heal us? To save us? In the region of Moab (of Ruth fame), the town of Gilead was well-known as a place to obtain all sorts of medicinal balms and other healing items. The phrase is understood that Yahweh had the means if only the way were shown. That perennial cry of the Jewish people, of all oppressed peoples: Where is our Mashiach? Where is our Messiah? Where is our savior? Who will save us?—especially when the One with the medicine can’t somehow get it to the people.

You can begin to see why the Jewish people might think that their covenant with the Holy One had been broken. Much of their history is an endless cycle of being in “right relationship” with God and being out of “right relationship” and then struggling to get back in “right relationship” with God—remember, their agreement was that if they obeyed Yahweh and kept God’s precepts and laws, Yahweh would bless Abraham and all of his descendants. This is the promise—the covenant. But, then a community member does something that besmirches the entire community, and they then believe that they are out of the Holy One’s favor—and we know when that happens, all sorts of nasty things will transpire. This is what is meant in antiquity to be in covenant with the Divine entity. For a cynic, it looks like a potent tool to keep people in line. Do as you are instructed, and God will not harm our community. But do something to anger our God--do something to damage our covenant—our relationship with Yahweh—and we have a problem on our hands. How are we to repair that relationship? How do we return into covenant with God? How do we bridge the gap between Yahweh and us? Which might be one of the greatest theological questions we can ask.

In her book, After the Rain, author Alexandre Elle writes this: “No relationship is perfect, and they aren’t all worth repair, but finding the discernment to push through and gain insight from our experiences and connections can be where we find the depths of what we can withstand and overcome.” Obviously, written from a place of healing. Here was this woman who had gone through struggles and suffered emotional abuse and neglect most of her life, and she found a way to heal through her writing—her poetry and prose—and her books, such as After the Rain, which gives us practical and often beautiful advice on how to deal with life after an upheaval—a family crisis—a broken relationship—anything that needs soothing. She offers ideas and words that can act as a sort of balm for our troubles, and then we take the time to let the medicine work. And then you are able to lift yourself out of your bed and walk forth securely as the choir sang—or the disabled man that Jesus commands to pick up his mat and walk, which he did.Jesus didn’t walk over and pick the man up. And he didn’t stand there and scold him about his condition. He did say; you are healed, stand up, take up your mat and walk. And the man did. The man started his healing because he had faith in the balm of Jesus’ words and teachings.

So, just what did Jesus say about all of this healing? He taught that a critical component of healing is forgiveness. He taught that the forgiveness required for healing was the medicine, and then time can work its magic. To illustrate this, Jesus told a troublesome parable. Let’s hear the version of this found in Matthew:

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.[a]

23 “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold[b] was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the [King] ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

26 “At this, the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ 27 The servant’s master [the King] took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let him go.

28 “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins.[c] He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

29 “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

30 “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master [the King] everything that had happened.

32 “Then the [King] called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ 34 In anger, his master [The King] handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed.

35 [Jesus ends this parable with: “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Harsh, no? How many of you feel the servant got what he deserved? How many of you think that sending a human being to a place to be tortured, regardless of their crime, is inhumane punishment and doesn’t fit the crime? How many of you are grateful you are not the judges who have to sit in a courtroom every day and hear similar stories play out? Oh, wait—many of you are parents, so you know this very well. You have sat in judgment of so many venial sins and then had to pass judgment on them. Kids have a finely tuned sense of justice—one that they learn from you. How many of you felt a twinge of schadenfreude when the servant got in trouble? He earned his comeuppance, which fills some of us with glee—or at least a feeling that justice was done. But who’s justice, I ask? Jesus himself said that the Holy One would send healing—would send a balm. Is this what the parable means? Healing, in this case, requires each party to be treated equally, right? Or maybe not?

It is argued that the King in this story is a gentile, living under the protection of the Herodian Dynasty and probably one of Herod’s better tax collectors—but, the King in this story probably did not do the collecting himself; in fact, Brandon Scott, and others, argue that the servant in the story probably did the tax collecting for the King, who took his cut and then who sent the remainder on to Herod, who then took his cut, and sent it on to Rome. And don’t forget, the servant would have padded the amount owed on the tax as well. You can see why Tax Collectors were a despised lot. But the question remains: Should we expect the same treatment—parity—in all of these transactions? If I am forgiven, shouldn’t I forgive? If I am healed by your kind words, shouldn’t I turn around and heal others who have been damaged by my words? Isn’t an apology a type of balm as well?

We aren’t going to heal anything until we learn to listen to one another—really listen—until we have empathy with each other—until we are gentle and loving with each other. All the medicine in the world won’t work if your heart is stone and you’ve’ already made up your mind—you have already judged the situation and refuse to budge one inch from your position. That, too, requires some healing. Jesus said it best—and he wasn’t giving us a number that we had to meet—to forgive seventy-seven times (or sometimes that’s interpreted as seven times seventy), but either way, the number is moot—the meaning isn’t. We are to forgive and forgive and forgive. Forgiveness is the balm that can save us. True forgiveness.

And once a balm is applied, we then use the gift of time—time to let our flesh mend. Time to let our bones knit. Time to let our hearts heal. Time to heal the wounded soul that mourns for a loved one. Time to mend a relationship that was severed by an unkind remark. Time to heal our community. Time to heal our nation. Time does indeed heal everything. Amen.RESOURCES

Holy Bible, NIV and NRSV

<https://www.plough.com/en/topics/life/forgiveness/steven-mcdonalds-story>