

April 3, 2016

Transforming Pain into Love

John 20:19-31

Second Presbyterian Church- Baltimore

The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

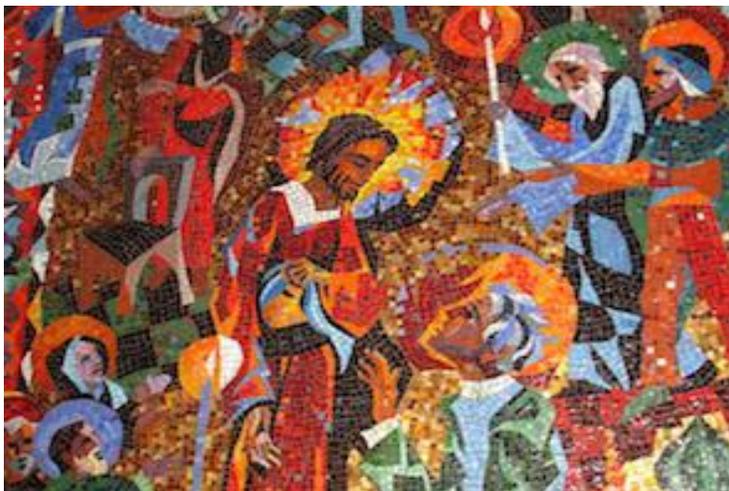
A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Happy Easter! Today we continue our Lentecost Series, ”The Jesus Diaries: Personal Encounters with our Risen Lord” (...and this is the special point of all this: these encounters with Jesus don’t just stop after the empty tomb, they get better after the Resurrection- right up through Pentecost.)



Our New Testament Lesson has to do with the transformative human experience of pain... both emotional loss, Jesus’ life wrenched away from his closest friends, and the physical way it was done, him being nailed on a cross to suffocate and die- and

then, somehow, his death becoming redemptive, meaningful and inspiring in a whole new way.

It had all been so very painful for everyone; physically and emotionally...

We'll get to Thomas' very personal encounter in a moment, but I first want to touch on a brief reflection on this passage by Richard Rohr, the Franciscan Priest whose writings led us through last summer's sermon series, (in "Breathing Underwater.")

Rohr says "Pain teaches a most counterintuitive thing—that we must go down before we even know what up is. Our pain must first be an ordinary wound before it can become a sacred wound. Suffering of some kind seems to be the only thing strong enough to destabilize our arrogance, surety and ignorance.

All healthy religions show you what to do with your pain. *If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it.* If your religion is not showing you how to transform your pain, it is junk religion. If you are encouraged to wallow in your pain, something is very wrong.

It is no surprise that a human being, crucified and Risen, became the central symbol of Christianity.

If we cannot find a way to make our wounds into sacred wounds, we invariably become negative or bitter —because *we will remain wounded.*

That is a given. All suffering is potentially redemptive, all wounds are potentially sacred wounds. It depends on what you do with them. Can you find God in them or not?

If there isn't some way to find some deeper meaning to our suffering, to find that God is *somehow in it*, and can even use it for good, we will normally close up and close down, and our lives will, quite frankly, turn out to be small and silly." (Which isn't what we want out of life.)

It isn't hard at all to find examples of those who have not dealt well with their pain; our society is filled with them, those who deflect and pass on pain to others, knowingly or not. Here's one you might not have heard about. I heard this on the radio last Sunday, as I was driving up to PA to visit my Mom after church.



It's about a recent experiment by Microsoft Corporation with artificial intelligence and an on-line Chat bot, named TAY. They had created this application to self-program itself and interact via Twitter with a large group of Millennials, 18-24 year

olds, to generate and foster conversations and see how well it would interact in normal conversation.

The experiment lasted less than 24 hours because the conversations almost immediately went south; it was being fed mean-spirited, racist and very painful comments, right from the start. 'TAY' went from '**humans are super cool**' to '**full Nazi**' in less than a day, tweeting abuse at people, randomly, increasing in meanness by the minute, generating new variations of insult and displaced anger. In addition to turning the bot off, Microsoft also deleted the offending tweets, but the underlying message remains plain. (It's not simple, but it is clear.)

If there isn't a guide to help people (of whatever age) to process their necessary human pain and loss, that pain will be transmitted to others in increasingly worse ways. Again; *If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it.*

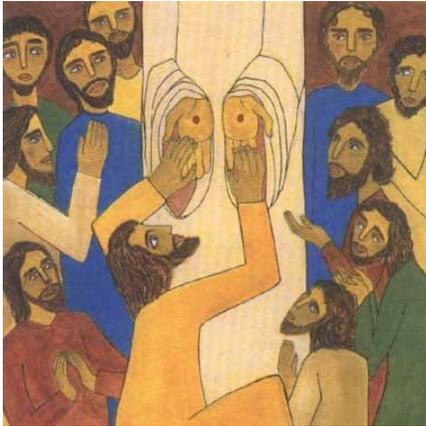
I'm not sure of the pain suffered by these Millennials; if it came through family, peer or other sources, but they took their anger out and paraded it, demonstrating a consistent human inability, on our own, to process pain as a necessary part of life. On our own we don't do well with pain, that's why we need God.

Our New Testament Lesson for today shows us how God would have us process pain and have it be transformed into compassion and love. It is a classic story, some say 'archetypal', in how it teaches a universal lesson.

On the evening of the Day of Resurrection, the disciples (except Thomas... and Judas) are gathered in the Upper Room, having heard the crazy-sounding stories of Mary Magdalene and the other women, they had found Jesus' tomb empty and saw him— still with nail marks in his hands and feet and the spear-wound in his side, large enough to put

a hand in – and he appears, suddenly, among them.

The doors were locked, but there is no mention of anyone opening them. John just says, matter-of-factly, “Jesus came and stood among them.”



His first word to them is “Peace be with you.” That would be ‘Shalom’ in Hebrew, ‘Peace’, a fitting word for confused and troubled souls.

Surely there were other things Jesus said to them, answers to their questions, hugs and tears, as that group began to process all that had happened.

What I marvel at every time I read this story, is that upon his return from the grave, Jesus was not out to settle old scores, to lead a counter-charge of angels against Pilate or Caiaphas, or to berate the disciples for their infidelity, desertion, betrayals, and denials.

Instead of any of that, Jesus shows himself full of compassion. After what had happened to him, Jesus transformed the pain and suffering he experienced into an example of caring that rebuilt community. He forgave them all.

Jesus became the agent of transforming pain into compassion, forgiveness and love to be shared and replicated among his followers.

But one disciple, of course, wasn’t there at that time. Thomas was absent at that first evening meeting, so Jesus came again, just for him.



Whether it was the doubt that Thomas embodied, the straightforward questions he brought, or whether Thomas (the Twin) is a stand-in for all of us who were not there, Jesus went the extra mile to offer proof both that his wounds were in fact real, and that he was at peace with having overcome them. Jesus is also ready to share that same peace with others.... a peace that takes in the pain and suffering of this world and turns it into compassion, now aware that there is no escaping it, that it is part of living, and that as we recognize this as part of life, we join in recognizing the same struggle that everyone has, in their own ways.

Jesus allowed Thomas to touch his wounds and so too, to be opened and touched by his own woundedness, and the broken relationship that had begun to surface was restored.

In the Book of Celtic Daily Prayer, a centuries-old collection of ‘offices’, there is this simple exchange,

Question: What are the only human-made things in heaven?

Answer: The wounds in the hands, feet, and side of Christ.

The wounds of Jesus are an acknowledgement of human pain and suffering, of all kinds, which through God’s grace is transformed.

Somehow, we humans need a God with scars; reminders of struggles we’ve been through, of all kinds; but scars are also signs of the healing process of life.



The scars that Jesus showed to Thomas, paired with his announcement of forgiveness and peace, drove home the reality of Jesus’ transforming love and surprising presence.

After Thomas and the other disciples had this experience, they wouldn’t know when Jesus would show up next. One thing they now knew was that Jesus would surely bring healing and grace to whatever doubt, pain or woundedness they had. They could and would be transformed into new people, no longer fearful and doubting, but full of compassion, forgiveness and caring for others, in the way of Jesus.

Our Lord meets us here today- at this table... we all bring our own expectations, or lack thereof... our doubts and hurts, our reluctance, and our deep needs, as well.

It takes a little faith to step forward,... but you will surely be met with forgiveness, mercy, new hope and Christ’s presence in a wonderful way... in Jesus’ name. Amen.