

“Touching Wounds”
John 20:19-29
April 23, 2017
Central Texas Metropolitan Community Church

He looked different. Both Luke’s and John’s Gospels agree that the post-resurrection Jesus looked different, even to the point of being unrecognizable. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus appears to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and joins them in conversation. But they didn’t realize who he was until, after he accepted their dinner invitation, he took bread and blessed it. Then they remembered a moment he had also blessed a couple loaves of bread that would miraculously feed thousands of people. And in that moment of remembrance, they recognized who he was.

Earlier in John’s Gospel, Mary Magdalene doesn’t recognize Jesus at the tomb, even when she hears his voice asking her why she was weeping. She assumes he’s a gardener. It’s only when he speaks her name, that she recognizes him, probably remembering the tender way he had always addressed her.

Later in John’s Gospel, the disciples are fishing. Jesus is on the shore, but they don’t recognize him until he tells them to cast their net on the other side of the boat, which resulted in a miraculously large haul of fish. One disciple would recognize that it was Jesus after remembering a similar incident at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

And this morning, Jesus appears to the disciples who are huddled behind locked doors, in fear of the Temple authorities. And true to form, they don’t seem to initially recognize him. Not until he reveals his scars, do they seem to know that it’s Jesus in their midst.

The Gospel writer would have us understand that, somehow, the agony that Jesus had undergone on the cross – an agony that would end only as he took his last tortured breath; an agony that was, no doubt, not only a physical suffering, but also a mental one, as he watched his most intimate friends turn tail and abandon him to the authorities.

Maybe you know what it’s like to have loved ones abandon you, reject you, or shut you out. It leaves a scar that transforms you. You will forever see the world in a different way. You build up walls to protect yourself against others and, soon enough, you’re nothing like the person you used to be. You’re almost unrecognizable. The persona you project hides the wounds that you have acquired through your life.

I tend to think the wounds that Jesus endured – wounds that would leave deep physical, psychological, and spiritual scars – transformed him into someone who even his closest friends couldn’t recognize. And it was only with the revelation of those scars, a moment of incredible vulnerability, that the disciples were able to see who he really was.

And no one can really know me, nor can anyone really know you, unless they are allowed to look past our facade. We can never be known unless we are brave enough to be so vulnerable as to show people the scars that we have acquired from life’s wounds.

With Thomas, Jesus went even further. He not only invited the disciple to look on his wounds, but to touch them. It’s an incredible act of vulnerability because, as we all know, unless you are very gentle, when you touch a fresh wound, it can be excruciatingly painful. But it was only by opening himself up to Thomas that Thomas would know that it was truly Jesus standing before him. It’s only by touching the wounds of the body of Christ that Thomas could really know Jesus.

And the same holds true today: Christ is still revealed to us when we touch the wounds of the Body of Christ. When we don’t look away, but instead, touch the brokenness and the woundedness of each other.

By wounds, I’m talking about things like loneliness: the dark and silent nights that you experience, with nothing to keep you company but the background noise of the television. I’m talking about the pain that engulfs you when the love of your life passes away. Or the loneliness that finds you

living off nothing but frozen dinners and tubs of ice cream because you have been left for another person. Loneliness that makes you doubt if you can go on with life.

By wounds, I'm talking about rejection. The sort of rejection that tightens its grip around your soul, choking the very life from you, when a family member turns their back on you for whatever the reason. The sort of rejection that leaves you confused and in shock because you thought your church family would never literally shun you, erasing your existence, which, I believe, is the worst sort of cruelty one person can inflict on another.

By wounds, I'm talking about the fear that can enslave a person for an entire lifetime. There is the fear of one's safety that many people live with – especially women; Muslims and Jews; people of color; transgender people; and gays, lesbians, and bisexuals.

But there's another sort of fear, and that's the fear of rejection. The fear that, if one lives authentically, love will be withheld, or visitation rights will be taken away, or you will never again be invited to a family gathering, or your classmates will talk about you behind your back. A fear that enslaves us, the chains of which cut deeply into our spirits, leaving lifelong scars.

These are the sorts of wounds I'm talking about. Wounds that we do our best to cover up with cosmetics. Wounds that we hide from others because if anyone were to catch a glimpse of them, they might turn away. And we just aren't sure we could bear it if that happened. Wounds that would cause us even more pain than they already do if someone were to treat them roughly.

But as John's Gospel tells it, Jesus takes that chance. He becomes vulnerable by opening himself up to the disciples and inviting the touch of one person from the group of people who had abandoned him. It was only in so doing that healing could take place – both his and that of the disciples.

Pope Francis has said, "I see clearly that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness [and] proximity." You see, the human spirit doesn't heal on its own. It can only heal as it experiences the gentle, compassionate and loving touch of another human being. And you can't touch unless you are intimately near.

And that's what I get from this morning's Gospel story. It's a tale of intimacy and healing. Healing that only happens when someone is willing to be vulnerable. Healing that takes place because that person was willing to allow others to see and to touch his wounds: deep spiritual wounds symbolized by the physical scars on his hands and side.

Henri Nouwen describes us all as wounded healers in his book by the same name. We are people who "must look after [our] own wounds but at the same time be prepared to heal the wounds of others." He goes on to say, "A Christian community is therefore a healing community not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision."

All of us, as members of the Body of Christ, are invited to a new vision, a new vision of the Christ who is within each of us when we reverently touch the wounds of others.

And so I want to close by leaving you with one final quote by Marianne Williamson: "In every community, there is work to be done. In every nation, there are wounds to heal. In every heart, there is the power to do it." Amen.