

## “The Healing Community”

Luke 24:36b-48

Last Monday night at Session we took a few moments to look at an article for our study time. (Session is not *all* fun and games, you know – we actually take time to study now and then!) The article was a summary of remarks made by three different speakers at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary on the opening night of a four-day theological symposium. One was Marcus Borg, whose name has been bandied about here in the past. He is a professor of religion and culture at Oregon State University and author of 16 books, including his best-seller, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. The others were the Rev. Brian D. McLaren, described as a leader in the “emerging church movement,” and Diana Butler Bass, an “independent scholar specializing in American religion and culture and author of two books, one of which is entitled, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, which was used as the basis for a past Session study over a period of several months. The topic of the three speakers was “new ways of being the church.” (To read the article, click [here](#).)

The article, written by Eva Stimpson for the Presbyterian News Service, is entitled, *Eye of the Hurricane*, which sounds just a bit ominous. It is based upon a comment from one of the speakers at the symposium who said that the church is in the midst of a “hurricane of change.” The speakers cited some of the depressingly familiar figures demonstrating that “the United States is growing less religious.” I don’t think we need to go over that ground again. What these figures show, said the speakers, is “a decline of interest in parties and labels,” even including the label “Christian,” not to mention labels like Presbyterian or Methodist or some of the subgroups such as liberal, conservative, evangelical, and so on. The speakers suggested that Christians need to come up with new language to describe themselves, new ways of telling the story of Jesus.

Diane Butler Bass asked a question that I find particularly intriguing. “What if the Christian story doesn’t start with the Great Commission” (the command to go into the world and make disciples of all nations), but instead with Jesus’ words about loving God and our neighbor? If we would begin there, Bass suggests, it would “ground us in humility, in a profound sense of our own limitations.

That is a pretty radical suggestion for some of us. It is for me. In the church where I grew up it was made very clear to us that our main purpose was to be personally saved ourselves, and after that to evangelize others, to help bring others to Christ, both here at home and abroad. If people had another religion, we needed to help convert them to Christianity. Ms. Bass is suggesting that instead of starting there, we start with Jesus’ commandment to love God and love our neighbor, whether or not they are Christians or potential Christians.

The other intriguing point for me was made by Brian McClaren, who said that pastors need to help their flock move away from a gospel that emphasizes “how to get the soul into heaven,” which he described as a very individualistic understanding of the Gospel and one that makes people nervous about evangelism, and in place of that to help people see evangelism as “recruiting people to join in the healing of the world.”

These concepts represent a pretty big shift. This is not changing the window dressing by tinkering with the style of worship, adding a praise band or a video screen. This is changing the very philosophy and purpose of the church. Not everyone would agree that these are good changes. I can imagine my former pastors, members of my family, classmates from college and seminary and others being aghast at the idea of putting the Great Commission anywhere but at the top of the agenda, or suggesting that our main purpose is anything but saving souls.

But these suggestions resonate deeply with me.

I have personally been leaning in these directions already, but had not heard them voiced by others as pointedly as here. And for me it is not simply a strategy for growth, that by changing the agenda we may be able to help the institution survive. It is more than that. For me it is trying to discern what Christ would have us be about in today's world.

I resonate deeply with the idea of the church being a healing community. I am no longer comfortable, if I ever was, with the idea that we are here to make sure that everyone has their tickets properly punched for entrance into the next life by ensuring that everyone believes the right doctrines and repeats the right words. I think the church is a place where people come to be accepted for who they are, to find and give support and love, to be part of a community, a family, and to go out from there to take Christ's love and healing into the world.

I know that some of you may be thinking, well, that sounds pretty nice. But when I think about some of the people I know who go to church, maybe even this church, and what their lives are like, how can they bring healing to the world?

I may have told before about a seminar that Diane and I attended several years ago with about a dozen other ministers and their spouses from the Presbytery we were in at that time. The sessions sometimes went on at length and because on occasion my mind wanders a bit in settings such as this, my mind wandered a bit.

I looked around the room at the others seated at the tables – fellow pastors and their spouses, some of whom I had known for quite some time, and I thought to myself: “What do I know about these people?” Well, that one there, already semi-retired, has been diagnosed with cancer. That one had serious difficulty at the last church, was asked to leave, and was now without work. That minister's spouse had been treated for cancer several years ago and was doing fairly well, but had been laid off from her job. The daughter of that couple, a woman minister and her husband, had taken her life several years before. Another had shared with the group that someone in his congregation had died recently, someone he had felt very close to. And he said that what he wanted to do was to grieve, but that what he had to do was to conduct the funeral service as a professional, to bring hope and comfort to others, to keep his emotions in check. But inside he was grieving.

Another pastor there, I knew, had a reputation for speaking too frequently and too long at Presbytery meetings. I wondered if he was at all aware of how other people felt about that. Still another, I knew, had been through a painful divorce and an emotional breakdown some years back. He was there with his second wife. One of the leaders of the seminar had just come through a difficult, stressful time in his work and was clearly still dealing with that. Another shared that he was seeing a counselor. Still another told me privately that he was thinking about early retirement because of the stress. And then there was us, Diane and me – and although our own problems and struggles were not as dramatic as some of the others, they were very real to us.

This may all sound pretty grim. But it is real life. Here we were, a group of clergy and their spouses. What a battered and bruised group of humanity we were. And yet these were folks who felt called to the ministry and who were serving their churches as best they could.

Some here may be familiar with the Catholic author Henri Nouwen and the title of one of his books, “The Wounded Healer.” That seems to say it pretty well. We were a group of wounded healers. And, of course, any pastor can look out at the faces in his or her congregation on any given Sunday morning and do the same thing. What do I know about these people? Well I know about this one's grieving, and I know that that one is without work, and that this family is having difficulty, and that person is depressed, and on and on.

When you get right down to it, we are all wounded healers. The gathered community of the faithful that you see here this morning is no different in substance than that group of ministers and spouses at the retreat. For all of us are called to ministry, to serve Christ and one another, and to bring healing to our world. And we are all wounded in one way or another.

Now go with me to visit another group of people huddled together on Easter evening, frightened and confused, trying to make sense out of the crucifixion and now, reports of Christ being risen. According to Luke, suddenly into the midst of this group of people comes the risen Christ. To a certain extent we can do with this group of people what I did with my colleagues at the retreat. We can ask ourselves, “what do we know about these people?” There is Peter. We know he was impetuous, often speaking without a lot of forethought. Sometimes, by the grace of God, he managed to say the right thing. Occasionally he was even inspired, brilliant. Some of us can manage that on occasion also. But then, like many of us, he was capable of blurting out the absolute worst thing he could possibly say, and then was left to think about it for days afterward. “Why did I say that?” Garrison Keillor said once about the then governor of Minnesota, Jesse Ventura, that it would be a big help to him if he had a time delay on his mouth, say a 24-hour delay. But then, he admitted, that most of us could use such a delay. Peter could have used one. What else do we know about Peter? We know that he made great pronouncements of loyalty, and then failed miserably to live up to his bold pronouncements. “Though all others forsake you, I will never forsake you!”

Seated nearby are the brothers, James and John, known as “the sons of thunder,” given to explosiveness. Also they were ambitious, opportunistic, maybe even a little power hungry. When Jesus was facing his darkest hour, their heads were filled with thoughts of power and glory, they were jockeying for the best position, the highest places. “Lord, grant that we may sit, one on your right and one on your left when you come into your glory.”

As we look around the room at the others there that evening we could ask, “who among this group of faithful disciples stood by Jesus when he needed them?” And our answer would have to be that there is not one person there that evening that did that. That is what we know about these people, this rag-tag group of wanna-be disciples.

Yet, according to Luke, Christ appears to them that evening and greets them with the words that we use on Sundays: “Peace be with you.” Then after showing them his hands and his side, and after talking to them about the scriptures, he says “You are witnesses of these things.” And it seems to me that what Luke is telling us is that here is the church. Here are the people who make up the church of Christ, the people among whom Christ dwells, the people who are charged with being witnesses to Christ. A wounded, battered group of human beings who often fail to live up to their potential, who often do those things they ought not to do and fail to do those things they ought to do. And yet these are the people to whom Christ makes his presence known, and to whom he entrusts his mission in the world.

Henri Nouwen says: “Our (lives are) full of brokenness – broken relationships, broken promises, broken expectations. How can we live with that brokenness without becoming bitter and resentful except by returning again and again to God’s faithful presence in our lives.” We are all called to be wounded healers. We are all recruited and called to recruit others in the healing of the world. I think the speakers were right about that.