

# THE WOUNDED HEALER

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## READINGS

The first is from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 10

They were now on the way to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. The disciples were filled with dread and the people following behind were overwhelmed with fear. Taking the twelve disciples aside, Jesus once more began to describe everything that was about to happen to him in Jerusalem.

"When we get to Jerusalem," he told them, "the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the scribes. They will sentence him to die and hand him over to the Romans. They will mock him, spit on him, beat him with their whips, and kill him, but after three days he will rise again."

[And Jesus said to them,] "You know that in this world kings are tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them. But among you it should be quite different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the servant of all. For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others.

## SERMON

This summer I read *The Scarlet Letter* for the first time since high school. The iconic American story of Hester Prynne, the fallen woman who has a child out of wedlock. She who cannot hide her sin becomes the town scapegoat, with the scarlet letter A emblazoned upon her breast. Her partner in sin, hidden from the townspeople, carries his own scarlet letter within his breast. He is the Rev. Mr. Arthur Dimmesdale, beloved young minister of the parish. Listen to the cadences of Nathaniel Hawthorne's intricate 19<sup>th</sup> century prose, reflecting on how heavily Mr. Dimmesdale carries his sin.

To the high mountain peaks of faith and sanctity he would have climbed, had not the tendency been thwarted by the burden of crime or anguish, beneath which it was his doom to totter. It kept him down on a level with the lowest; him, the man of ethereal attributes, whose voice the angels might else have listened to and answered!

But this very burden it was that gave him sympathies so intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind; so that his heart vibrated in unison with theirs, and received their pain into itself, and sent its own throb of pain through a thousand other hearts, in gushes of sad, persuasive eloquence. Oftenest persuasive, but sometimes terrible!

The people knew not the power that moved them thus. They deemed the young clergyman a miracle of holiness. They fancied him the mouth-piece of Heaven's messages of wisdom, and rebuke, and love. In their eyes, the very ground on which he trod was sanctified. The virgins of his church grew pale around him, victims of a passion so imbued with religious sentiment, that they imagined it to be all religion, and brought it openly, in their white bosoms, as their most acceptable sacrifice before the altar.

The aged members of his flock, beholding Mr. Dimmesdale's frame so feeble, while they were themselves so rugged in their infirmity, believed that he would go heavenward before them, and enjoined it upon their children that their old bones should be buried close to their young pastor's holy grave.

And all this time, perchance, when poor Mr. Dimmesdale was thinking of his grave, he questioned with himself whether the grass would ever grow on it, because an accurs-ed thing must there be buried."

I find this book reads quite differently now that I am an adult – and a minister! I have a new level of sympathy and identification with both sinners – the woman proscribed and limited by her time, and the pastor struggling to lead and inspire while carrying inner torment.

How poignantly ironic that the very sin, the very woundedness that makes the Rev. Mr. Dimmesdale feel so completely unqualified for the ministry, is the very thing that makes him such a powerful minister. What Hawthorne, good 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian that he was, seemed to understand as his Puritan forbears did not, is that our very sinfulness, our very wounded-ness is what makes us most human, what makes us capable of connecting to one another.

For the greatest gift any of us bring to the world is our own brokenness, the wound that lies at the core of our beings. We all have such a tenderness or sadness, fear or loneliness somewhere inside. There are times we feel like a motherless child, friendless, without a true home. Times we feel deeply and hopelessly flawed, and yes, sinful.

And we, like Mr. Dimmesdale, usually fail to understand fully that to be human is to be flawed. It is through our flaws and knowing that suffering is universal that we connect most powerfully with one another.

Mr. Dimmesdale could never see that his own burden of guilt "gave him sympathies .. intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind." It made his very heart vibrate with theirs, receive their pain as his own and send "its own throb of pain through a thousand other hearts in gushes of sad persuasive eloquence." He could never see that he is a quintessential wounded healer, his very wound allowing him to speak so clearly to the pain of others. Yet while his suffering gave him a depth of compassion for his flock, his theology allowed no such compassion for himself.

Hawthorne again.

It is inconceivable, the agony with which this public veneration tortured him. It was his genuine impulse to adore the truth.... He longed to speak out from his own pulpit at the full height of his voice, and tell the people what he was.

"I, whom you behold in these black garments of the priesthood—I, who ascend the sacred desk, and turn my pale face heavenward, taking upon myself to hold communion in your behalf with the Most High Omniscience ... I, who have laid the hand of baptism upon your children—I, who have breathed the parting prayer over your dying friends....

I, your pastor, whom you so reverence and trust, am utterly a pollution and a lie.

Thank goodness you do not require or even desire such perfection in me – or of each other in this community. Thank goodness we embrace a tradition that affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person rather than an original sinfulness that requires purification and punishment. A tradition that holds each child born as one more redeemer. Thank goodness we can welcome Gus to the world and to this community as a complete person. That I can lay this imperfect hand on the brow of a babe and feel worthy to be the conduit of blessings.

Though we resist and recoil, our wounds, our pain, our flaws are evidence of life. They create who we are as surely as any joy or accomplishment. The greater challenge than resisting pain is to enter our wounded-ness – not just accept it passively, but to experience it fully. For the gift of living with and through such experience is to become more fully human. Better at living life. This is why I find working with the Enneagram so powerful. For works from the sense of wounded-ness at the core, helps us see how it can lead to our most self-defeating, if not self-destructive behavior. It does not seek to "fix" what is broken, for if our wounds are what make us human, then we are trying to fix our humanity. An impossible task. Rather the Enneagram helps us see how we can move with grace and power through and with our wounds, ultimately turning them into the gifts they are.

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of the holiest week in the Christian calendar. The day when, according to the story, Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph, moving inexorably to his most human moments – his suffering and death. Yet the story begins earlier in the gospels when Jesus first turns to Jerusalem, knowing full well what awaits him. Jesus does not immediately embrace this suffering – he certainly has his moments of resisting and bargaining – but he does ultimately accept that the pain of death is inevitable. He does not run from it. He walks deliberately toward it even as his followers recoil in fear.

Just as Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew that he must return to a Germany ruled by Nazis, fully aware of the possible consequences, so Jesus knew he must bring his message to the center of power in Jerusalem. So, too, must we turn into and not away from our wounded-ness.

Christianity has long had to wrestle with the meaning of Jesus' agonizing death on the cross. Some have taken from the story a lesson that suffering is necessary for redemption and a deep spiritual life. It take issue with interpretation. That suffering is inevitable does not mean it is necessary. Rather I think the question is when inevitable suffering arises – either from inner torment or outward pain – how we will we address. How we will let it in, see it as the stuff of life, let it deepen our spiritual connections to one another and to the greater good? How we can we learn to accept that we are all wounded and let it make us more powerful healers? How we will let that knowledge help us move with more power and strength to heal ourselves and heal the world.

For we do touch a depth when we engage our suffering, our wounded-ness. From that place we grow in compassion for ourselves and others. From that place the call to justice arises. We are all ultimately wounded and therefore may be wounded healers.

Lately I have been moving into a place of sorrow that is not of my own making. My father has been diagnosed with cancer, and my mother, after successful knee replacement surgery, had a fall and has a compression fracture in her back. My brothers, sister and I have begun to care for them and help them negotiate the new reality of illness and frailty in their lives.

This has been more achingly painful and richer than I ever imagined possible. It has changed me already, and it is only the beginning of this journey. I have long known that many of my wounds arise from ways my parents were operating from their own pain. I have done my share of therapy to forgive my parents their inadequacies and embrace them as flawed humans. As the years have passed, much of the charge has gone out of the perceived injustices of my youth and I see less and less to forgive. I would have told you, until just these last few weeks, that I was done with my issues with my parents.

I have now learned that done is just not a word that applies. Case in point. When I was in North Carolina with my folks, I had a fight with my father over toilet paper. Even from the middle of it, knowing this was silly, I found myself playing the part of my mother in their fights. I felt my mother coming out of my mouth and I get the words back in. I will *never* be done processing and integrating my relationship with my parents.

It is so painful to watch my father struggle with illness and limitation. Being who he is, he may never fully acknowledge any of it, even on his death bed. I recognized even in the middle of it, that the fight over toilet paper was about his frustration at having to be cared for, unable to drive or shop for himself, having the daughter who he was always supposed to be strong for carry the heavier load. Even as I was channeling my mother and freaking out at how naturally it came to me, my heart was breaking for my father.

If neither of us was wounded or in pain, if both of us were "fixed" and totally together, the layered meanings and depth of even our fight would never have arisen. Our wounds make us human. Our wounds connect us to one another. Our wounds are the very stuff of our lives.

Those who heal are not those who are healed. Those who heal are those who know what it is to suffer. That is the meaning for me of Jesus death – not that he was the perfect man who ascended to heaven and I am somehow supposed to emulate by purifying myself of all flaws and all sin. But that we are all human and that in the inevitable suffering that life brings us and we create for ourselves, lie the seeds of our salvation. We are wounded and acknowledging this truth and moving through life in acceptance of it, is our task.

That our suffering connects us and we can end up doing this work together is the greatest hope.  
Blessed be. Amen