

THE HEALING POWER OF COMMUNITY

(09/26/2021)

Scripture Lesson: 1 Corinthians 12:27

Romans 12:3-5

John 15:1-11

“I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (1 Corinthians 12:27)

Once again, good morning! I am so happy that we can be together this beautiful fall morning! I think this is where we are supposed to be this morning—here in church on Rally Day, celebrating the beginning of another church year.

Rally Day is the day when we traditionally come back to church after a summer filled with leisure activity, being with family, and perhaps even travel. In past years, it was the first day of Sunday school, and a portion of the worship service was set aside as a Service of Dedication for our children and teachers. The choir would return after their summer sabbatical to grace us with their introits and anthems. Last but by no means least, following the worship service we would have gone downstairs for a lunch of ham, baked beans, potato salad, a variety of casseroles, a plethora of desserts, and a wonderful time of fellowship.

Rally Day marks the beginning of a new church year, but Rally Day this year is not like it was in the past. Our boards and committees are still not meeting in person. Our Sunday morning Bible study and the Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Study and Growth Group are on hold until the numbers come down. We *really* miss our coffee hour following worship. For those of you who have just begun attending our church, I’m sure you have heard about our coffee hours; they are, indeed, legendary! The spread is often more characteristic of a brunch than a coffee hour. It is a time for us to be together, to get to know each other, to share with each other.

By the way, I want to commend you and thank you for being so patient. This is the first time that we, as a church, have been through a pandemic, and we are sort of feeling our way along. I suspect some of you feel we are moving too slowly; others that we are throwing caution to the winds. Thank you for being so understanding and patient as we try to navigate the labyrinthian paths of this wilderness experience.

I love September! The leaves are beginning to change color, and the birds are starting their trek south. Early mornings, when I walk our dog, I notice the increasing moments of silence, the relative absence of birdsong. The sun sets a little earlier and is a little lower on the horizon every day. In addition to the excitement of new beginnings, I always feel a sadness creep over me at this time of year, a sadness tied to the end of summer and premonitions of the impending darkness and cold of the months ahead. New beginnings often seem to be connected to endings.

This summer has been difficult for some of us. This pandemic period has been difficult for all of us, though we need to remember that it has been more difficult for some than for others. As we gather this morning at the beginning of a new church year, we are acutely aware of several empty seats in this sanctuary, seats that were once filled by those who are no longer with us. I am thinking of Don Jolie, Rae Kay, Ursula Guenon, Bud Hubley, Pat Grogan, and Gil Joe. We miss them. We hold their loved ones in our hearts and in our prayers.

So, we come together this morning as the gathered church. As we gather for worship and fellowship, we witness to the importance of community, that community which holds us and sustains us when we are going through difficult times. We are especially aware of the importance of community at the beginnings, the endings, and the transition periods of our lives, for community, true Christian community is a very special container, a container within which we live and through which we find meaning for our lives.

A few weeks ago, I found myself thinking of the matter of containers in general, and the container of our church in particular, as I attended a webinar led by the Jungian psychoanalyst Donald Kalsched. Kalsched's talk drew from his recent book *Trauma and the Soul: a psycho-spiritual approach to human development and its interruption*. This book, which addresses the ways that childhood trauma stunts our psychological development, our emergence into an authentic life, is near the top of the pile of books that I would like us to read together when we resume our study groups in person. This is because more of us have had our lives, our psychological development shaped or retarded by various kinds of trauma than we realize.

The webinar focused on how we experience and process personal traumas. An experience is traumatic when it is so powerful that it can't be held in consciousness and integrated into our psyche. The trauma interrupts our normal developmental process and the emergence of our evolving authentic identity. On a deeper level, the trauma threatens that which is most precious to us, what Kalsched calls the soul. (I love it when psychologists use religious language or believe they have discovered something that we have known for thousands of years!) In response to the threat of our core identity, we build a system of defenses against the remembering and re-experiencing of the traumatic event or events. These defenses later become problematic when they cut us off from our feelings, from vulnerability, from intimacy, from love, and from life.

In addition to personal or childhood traumas like physical, emotional, sexual, and verbal abuse, in addition to the scars our military personnel carry from the traumatic experiences of war, there are also collective traumas, traumas that we all experience, that we all share. We can address and hopefully heal our personal traumas in psychotherapy. But how can we address and hopefully heal the collective traumas that shape us, that break our connection to life, that lead us to be drawn to authoritarian leaders who simplify the problem and the solution, and who often lead us into even worse traumas?

I am, of course, thinking of the collective national trauma of the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, and our response, initiating two wars that we could not win, wars that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. We need to remember that over 100,000 members of our armed forces have died by their own hand since September 11, 2001, and that more of our service men and women died from suicide following the Vietnam conflict than died in battle. This gives a new depth of meaning to the diagnostic term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

So, what can we do to heal the collective traumas that claim so many lives and weigh heavy on our souls? I am thinking not just of war and both foreign and home-grown terrorist attacks. I am thinking of the earthquakes and political unrest in Haiti, the hurricanes that have battered the southeastern United States, and the forest fires in California, one of which has burned an area the size of the state of Rhode Island. I am thinking of the number of people in our country and around the world that have died from COVID-19, first because we didn't have a vaccine and we didn't know enough to wear a mask and socially distance, and later because so many of us chose not to be vaccinated, to wear a mask, to socially distance. Many people experience the polarization that has seized Congress and the political discourse in our nation as traumatic—as threatening our democracy and the future of this country.

How can we hold these traumatic events in such a way that we can face them, respond to them, and hopefully even play a role in healing them? I believe that we need a collective response to these collective traumas. I believe we need to draw from the archetypal power of ritual and symbol to help us respond, to give us the sense that, despite personal and collective traumas, life goes on. However, we have few rituals in our secular life, and we have had even less over the past year and a half. Even the ritual transition of one administration to another has been disrupted this year by those who refuse to accept the results of the election.

We have recurring, traditional rituals in our church. These rituals are important to us. On a Sunday in September, we celebrate Rally Day. The first Sunday in October, we celebrate the anniversary of my call, on October 7, 1997, to be the settled pastor of this church by renewing the vows we made to each other twenty-four years ago. The last Sunday in October, we (at least we Protestants) celebrate Reformation Sunday. The first Sunday in November we celebrate All Souls' and All Saints' Day with a special Service of Remembrance. Following Thanksgiving and Stewardship Sunday, we enter the liturgical season of Advent with its traditional themes of hope, faith, love, and joy. A highlight of the year for many is our beautiful candlelight Christmas Eve service of lessons and carols. The beginning of the year leads us into Lent, the deeply moving Maundy Thursday service of Tenebrae, the United Parishes of Southborough Easter sunrise service by the side of the lake in Hopkinton, and our own Easter celebration in our sanctuary. These, and so many other special days, special worship services, mean so much to us!

We may feel that there is not much that we, as individuals and a church, can do in response to the collective traumas that beset us, but we do what we can. For example, this month in our mission offering we give to the American Himalayan Foundation in support of its program to Stop Girl Trafficking in Nepal. In October, we will be supporting Straight Ahead Ministries, a

ministry to young men and women in the juvenile justice system. We can't do a lot, but this does not stop us from doing what we can.

As you know, when it comes to solving social and cultural problems, when it comes to healing the wounds that we inflict on each other personally, nationally, and internationally, I believe that "It all begins with me." If I don't like the amount of anger I see in the world, I should try to become less angry. If I don't like what greed and rampant, unrestrained, unregulated capitalism does to us as a society and a world, I should work to overcome income inequality. If I think there is something wrong with having children go to bed hungry or dying of diseases that could be cured, I should support agencies that are addressing these problems. If I don't like the polarization of our political parties in Washington, I should work to dissolve my polarizing judgments of those whose political views differ from mine. If I don't like the fact that people don't listen to me, I can always try harder to listen to them.

Although we are told to fight fire with fire, we know that it is better to fight it with water. We know that we can't fight hatred with hatred; it can only be fought with love. Even here, "fought" is not the best way to frame it. We *know* this, or at least we should. This is what Martin Luther King, Jr. taught. This is what Mahatma Gandhi taught. This is what Jesus taught. I can't control other people or the social situation, but I can control myself, or at least I can try harder to control myself. There are times, however, when this seems like a lonely stance. When I work on myself, in what a Buddhist teacher has called "the ultimate political act," does it really make a difference?

I believe that we do make a difference. This is because we are all part of an interconnected system. The family systems people said this many years ago. They told us that the individual exists within a family, lives within a family. If you change any one of the family members through psychotherapy, you change the family. And there is usually one member of a dysfunctional family that is highly motivated to change. That is where we should start.

However, I believe it goes even deeper than systems theory suggests. I believe we are connected on a very deep level, a metaphysical level, with everyone and everything. The second-century Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, one of the great minds of Buddhism, tells us,

Things derive their being and nature by mutual dependence and are nothing in themselves.

In the early nineteen-hundreds, science's concept of the universe was turned upside down with Einstein's theory of relativity and the introduction of quantum mechanics by Niels Bohr, both of whom questioned the separate identity of energy and matter. As a result, our comfortable understanding of a universe made up of solid little bits of matter behaving in accordance with the principles of classical or Newtonian physics were basically exploded¹. We now know that an elementary particle is not a separate entity but is part of an interconnected tissue of events, a dynamic, unbroken whole. The Canadian physicist David Peat describes this phenomenon in terms of an explicate order, which is what we see, what we experience, and what he calls the implicate order, an energy field that underlies and connects this realm of space and time.

This reminds me of Jung's concept of the collective unconscious: a vast informational and energy field that not only underlies but gives rise to consciousness, a cross-cultural realm in which we all participate and share.

But why is all this physics and psychology stuff important to us as Christians? I wonder if what these scientists are talking about, this implicate order, this field that connects us on a very deep level with our brothers and sisters, with all sentient beings, is basically or ultimately *spiritual*, whether this is what we Christians and Buddhists and Taoists and Hindus have been talking about for literally thousands of years. We not only know that it is spiritual; we experience it as *personal*. We give it a name: God. And we build a relationship with it.

Jesus said, "I am the vine, and you are the branches." If this is true, then we, as branches, are all connected to each other—not on a superficial level but on a very deep level. We are all connected with each other because Jesus dwells in us and we dwell in him, in God, in the kingdom of God that is both within us and among us. Jesus tells us that "apart from me you can do nothing." If we "abide in him," we draw our life and the meaning of our life from him.

The apostle Paul, who sought to share his experience of the risen Christ with the emerging Christian church, echoes these teachings in the 12th chapter of his letter to the church at Rome when he says,

For as in one body we have many members, and not all members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

We are "one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another." Perhaps Paul is not speaking metaphorically here; perhaps he is simply describing something that he had experienced! In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul continues to unfold this metaphor of the church as the living body of Christ. He tells us that, as members of the church, we are members (parts) of Christ's mystical body. In the 2nd chapter, in his description of Christ Jesus as the cornerstone of "a temple that is not built with human hands," Paul writes,

In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

As I read what Jesus said about being the vine that connects the branches, and as I read what the apostle Paul said about how we are all joined with one another in the mystical body of Christ, especially when I view it through the lens of the insights of Buddhism and contemporary physics, I begin to wonder if they are really metaphors or whether they are describing a deep metaphysical reality. This way of seeing can help us experience not only our deep connection with God through Jesus, but also our deep connection with each other. This helps us understand how or why the changes we make in ourselves, our efforts to become more accepting, more caring, more compassionate, more loving, make a difference to the whole. This also helps us to

understand the efficacy and healing power of intercessory prayer, which is an integral part of the spirituality of this church.

We all need community. We need to belong and feel we belong to a community. This is because we are social beings. However, not all communities are created equal. So today, as we gather on Rally Sunday, we need to remember that we are not just a community; we are a *special* community, a *sacred* community! We, as a church, are part of the mystical body of Christ, that Christ who is working for healing and wholeness in our world. Because of this, our response to the collective traumas in our country and around the world is at the heart of who we are. We reach out to others because, in Christ, we feel a deep interconnectedness with our brothers and sisters in need. We know that, since we are all one in Christ, when we do it for one of “the least of these,” we do it to Christ.

I am so happy that we can be with one another in this beautiful sanctuary this morning! As unique individuals, of “many sizes and shapes,” of “many different backgrounds,” we help to incarnate the mystical body of Christ. As I said, I believe this is where we are supposed to be this morning—here in church on Rally Day, celebrating the beginning of another church year!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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