

“No Pain, No Gain”

Hebrews 5:1-7; Mark 10:46-52

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

August 2, 2015 – 10th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

There's an engaging play by Thornton Wilder that's not as well-known as his more famous "Our Town." It's called "The Angel that Troubled the Waters." A strange title until you know the storyline.

The scene of the play is the pool of Siloam, which is mentioned in the Gospel of John. Here, it was said, an angel regularly stirs the surface of the water. Whoever is lowered into the pool at that moment is healed of whatever infirmity he or she has.

One day a throng of sufferers gathers around the water, as they do every day. In the crowd on that particular occasion is a physician who, himself, is the victim of a disease from which he has found no relief. He has tried everything in his power. So he, too, comes forward seeking restoration of wholeness and health. He, too, wants to be healed and to be freed of his chronic condition.

As he pushes forward with the others, suddenly he hears the angel of healing speaking to him. The voice says, "Draw back, physician Healing is not for you." It continues: "Without your wound where would your power be? It is your very remorse that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men.

"The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as one human being broken on the wheels of living. In Love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve. Draw back, physician."

The doctor is bewildered and doesn't know what to make of the message he has heard; yet, he turns away from the pool as he is told. While he does so he is latched onto by someone in the crowd. He immediately recognizes the man who now pleads with him to come and heal his son, for the doctor is the only one who has been able to help this child in the past. Then another seeker comes up and requests him to heal his daughter.

What the doctor learns in this story is the truth of what has been told him. He realizes that those who have themselves been wounded are, in turn, often the best healers of others. He comes to understand that one's own pain forms the basis for getting in touch with the pain of another.

This story reminds me about one of the beatitudes, where we hear Jesus say, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Our first reaction to that word "mourn" is to connect it with the loss of one close to us, but there are other kinds of losses for which one might mourn as well. There is the loss of health, the loss of a job, the loss of a love, the loss of a dream. All of these wound us and leave us bleeding in their own way. A little part of us dies with every loss we suffer.

Yet, despite our personal hurts, we also may gain from the troubles which befall us. In particular we learn how much we can endure and still go on. We can function even when we have been crippled. Our pain stretches us so that other setbacks become more manageable by comparison. What's a sore toe after you've broken a leg? What's a rude clerk after your best friend has moved away? What's the loss of a raise when others are being laid from employment?

Pain leads us to endurance, perhaps greater than we ever thought. Beyond that, suffering gives us empathy and identification with similar pain in another. We can connect with them not just out of compassion, but because we have gone through the same distress ourselves. It removes a barrier between us and another when we say, "I know what it's like" for then we speak out of our own experience as well. We are credible to another because we, too, have been there.

A family friend had a laryngectomy some years back. The doctors talked with him before the operation and tried to reassure him that, after rehabilitation, he could function quite adequately. He heard those well-intended words but seemed unconvinced. His mood was dark and he approached his impending operation with pessimism. That is until the surgeon asked another man who had gone through the same procedure a year earlier to come and talk to Gene.

That man didn't paint a rosy picture or downplay the difficulties, but he was living proof that one did not have to be defeated by these circumstances. He showed that life can go on and become what you make it despite the loss. After that visit Gene's outlook improved and, when the time came for the surgery, he was emotionally prepared for it. The doctors did their best to assure him in his crisis, but Gene could really hear only one voice—the one who, also, had suffered in the same way. A future seems possible when a survivor brings that message.

Our struggles stretch us and build our confidence that we can endure what may come next in life. Importantly, they are a gift by which we can also reach out to help others in their suffering. Every difficult experience we go through has the potential of being able to assist someone else. The only problem is that often we don't realize what capacity we have. Sometimes, too, we fear to go back into our own pain though that's what we have to do.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews seems to understand what it means to be a wounded healer. Our scripture for today says: "Every high priest is chosen from the people and appointed to serve God on their behalf, to offer sacrifices and offerings for sins. Since he himself is weak in many ways, he is able to be gentle with those who are ignorant and make mistakes. And because of his own weakness, he offers sacrifices not just for the sins of his-people, but also for his own sins."

The writer of this letter doesn't stop there, but goes on further to describe the suffering that Jesus endured. He tells us that through these ordeals Jesus fully understood human suffering. Jesus knows our pain through his pain, and reaches out to comfort and heal us. When we are hurting, we are given the assurance that we're met by one who knows our grief and has the power to help us overcome it.

Perhaps one of the hardest losses in life is for a parent to lose a child. Two weeks after his nine-year-old daughter died the Rev. John Claypool delivered a sermon with the title, "Does Faith Help in Difficult Times?"

The words to respond to that question came hard that day, but they came. In his sermon this pastor said: "Here I am this morning—sad, broken-hearted, still bearing in my spirit the wounds of the darkness. I confess to you honestly that I have no wings with which to fly or any legs on which to run—but listen, by the grace of God, I am still on my feet.

"I have not fainted yet. I have not exploded in anger, nor have I keeled over into the paralysis of despair. All I am doing is walking and not fainting, hanging in there, enduring with patience what I cannot change but have to bear.

"This may not sound like much to you, but to me it is the most appropriate and most needed gift of all. My faith has been the difference. It has given me the gift of patience, the gift of endurance, the strength to walk and not faint. And I am here to give thanks to God for that! "

Now I don't know any more about John Claypool than this, but I would guess from these words that he came out a stronger person for the suffering he experienced. His faith spoke to his need and gave him the ability to overcome his adversity. One other thing: he was given the gift to help others in his community to recover from like tragedy. He would know their pain and could meet them in the tears of common experience.

There is no question as to whether we will be wounded or not as we go through life. That's clear, though undesired. The question is whether, from our wounds, can we become healers? If so, maybe then our losses shall not be in vain, and God can use even our weakness to strengthen and bring hope to others.