

February 8, 2004

Wound

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Opening Words

We are here

to worship: to sing, bless life, and celebrate
and to ponder truths that are deeper
than the merely visible.

Here we are free to cultivate our deeper liberty,
and to contemplate ways to live a wiser life.
And so we begin by praying:

*May we live fully, love deeply, learn daily
and speak truly, that we might together leave
the sacred legacy of a better world.*

Sequence

We are here as we are,
human beings, tough and fragile,
each of us a gentle whirlwind of many feelings,
each of us a texture of memories and hopes,
expressed and unexpressed.
Some of us are worried about something,
others are confident, boisterous even.
some are pained, aching, others glow with health;
Some are frustrated, some joyous and grateful,
some feel abandoned, others feel a deep love;
some are scared about what's happening to them,
others are feeling the first blush of new friendship.

Some are feeling suspended, waiting for some other shoe to drop. Some
are looking for ways to transcend their broken-heartedness.

Others are quietly fuming about something or are disappointed in a friend, or are waiting for good news which may come at any moment. And many in this room feel half of these things all mixed up inside them at any given time.

Yet each of us is here as she or he is...fully human, glorious and fragile at the same time. Filled with feelings, yes, but also blessed by the solace of silence.... *silence*

Oh Love, we human beings, glorious and fragile, gather here on a Sunday morning in the northern Hemisphere of the Americas, in a lovely building built on land that borders on the Great Lakes, and a silver river, and the slanting hills of Appalachia. Though we are local, we know the universal...we know we are kindred to all other human beings on earth.

Many of these we know personally, and we bear their presence in our hearts day by day, in love, in worry, in hope, in grief. So we release these names for a moment, speaking them or remembering them, and expressing our ties to them as the proper preface to any good we experience here today.

naming

Let our human feelings and thoughts blend now in the mystery of music, which reminds us that no matter how many contradictions we bear within us, we can come to harmony and beauty at last.

Readings

The First Reading *is from Ruth Stones' 1995 book of poems called Simplicity. The poem itself is called "The Wound."*

The shock comes slowly as an afterthought.

First you hear the words and they are like all other words,
ordinary, breathing out of lips, moving toward you in a straight line.

Later they shatter and rearrange themselves.
They spell something else hidden in the muscles
of the face, something the throat wanted to say.

Decoded, the message etches itself in acid
so every syllable becomes a sore.

The shock blooms into a carbuncle.*
The body bends to accommodate it.

A special scarf has to be worn to conceal it.
It is now the size of a head.

The next time you look,
it has grown two eyes and a mouth.

It is difficult to know which to use.
Now you are seeing everything twice.

After a while it becomes an old friend.
It reminds you every day of how it came to be.

**inflamed boil is what I said when I read it orally,
since carbuncle is not a well known word.
Interestingly, it's also a kind of red jewel.*

The Second Reading comes from the *Middle Length Sermons of Siddattha Gotama*, whom we mostly know by his title, the *Enlightened One*, or *The Buddha*. The earliest versions of these scriptures date from the 4th century BCE.

“Some people say to me that they refuse to live a wise and good life until they get the answers to certain religious questions. They refuse to go forward until they find out: 1.) if the Universe lasts forever, or has an

end; 2.) if the soul is the same as the body or not; and 3.) whether a good and wise person survives death in some form or not.

But to me this is not much different from the story of someone who has been wounded deeply by a poisoned arrow. Companions and family members of the unfortunate person will call a surgeon to take the poisoned arrow out. But then the patient says: No, I don't want the surgeon to take the arrow out until I get answers to a few questions. Like, is the person who shot me of the noble class or peasant class? What's the archer's size...tall, short, wide, thin or medium? Now wouldn't such a person, in asking all those irrelevant questions, *die* before the poisoned arrow could be removed?"

Sermon:

When I was in college, my circle of friends was a lot like any other group of friends I have ever heard of. We had the usual long talks late into the night about life and politics and religion. We wept about our heartbreaks, and laughed at rude and hilarious jokes. I suppose we gossiped a bit about other people outside the protection of our circle.

And, we mercilessly teased each other. You know, made wise cracks at opportune times, which seemed to come around with *great* frequency. We teased Guy about being so tall, 6'5". (We called him Tree) We teased Bob about his nose, Marcia about her sensitivity, and they teased me about....well, we'll just leave *that* topic alone for a while.

We were each good at this game. We were clever and witty. We rarely got to the place where someone really resented the insults or got flustered. But if it *did* happen, we would immediately stop it. We never actually talked about them, but *we knew* that boundaries were real.

Now I think this kind of play among older teenagers or younger adults might serve a purpose. You see, by keeping it in the context of friendship, and by paying attention to certain boundaries, I think we

were using such games as a sort of *training ground*. A *training ground* to help us deal with the coming wounds and pains of adult life. We were honest enough to know that *we* would not be exceptions to the rules of life. We knew on some deep level that we had to prepare.

Such insult games, I'd guess, are supposed to serve to toughen us up. Letting the ritual insults slide off our back was training us to buck up to the coming *real* insults, and other hurtful words coming in our direction. We learn how not to let things "get our goat." We learn to thicken our skin, to become more insensitive to the stimuli around us. All of this, so that when the real serious wounds come, not from our friends, but from people outside our protected circle, we can at least survive.

I've been thinking about those college insult games a lot lately, because not long ago I suddenly noticed that I don't do such things with my friends now.

So I developed this theory to explain why I did such things once, and no longer do. I think I may be right about this.

Now we were not the only group of friends playing such a game. And thus, over the years, I have heard people who used such games to indeed grow very tough, *lambaste* their victims as "overly sensitive." "God, she is so sensitive. She always takes what I say so personally." Or "Man, is he ever a sensitive jerk. You say just the slightest thing to him, and he gets all bent out of shape."

Well, the older I get, I am less sure the world is packed with lots of overly sensitive people. I am much more sure it's filled with plenty of insensitive people, people who are *unwilling to accept responsibility for their impact on others*. They often end up blaming their victims as "feeling too much," or "over-sensitive."

I'm not sure how some folks get to be so insensitive. Maybe if they were playing some of the insult games I used to play, such things could shore up their insensitivity...I don't know. I know I had learn to recognize my

own insensitivity after a while, and make some changes in my way of living.

But you and I know there *are* indeed people in this world who hurt others and never see the blood they draw, or the pain they leave in their wake. When they hear others cry out in pain, they simply dismiss those others as being at fault: “THEY must be too sensitive, otherwise they wouldn’t feel so wounded. I was just having some fun.” Or, even worse, “I was just telling them the truth.”

But this whole area of *insensitivity* is a problem for all grown ups, I think, not just those who are for some reason particularly insensitive and loutish. During my life, I have discovered that the world of adulthood is often most accurately described as the world of toughness and denied feelings. Adults, far more than children, are often those people who avoid taking responsibility for their own behavior, and are quick to blame others or make excuses.

And because this is so, I think wounding can come from anyone, from any direction. It makes no difference how sensitive or insensitive adults claim to be, they wound. *Wounding is a universal phenomenon*. It is part and parcel with life itself. Siddhatha Gotama, The Buddha, said as much 2500 years ago. So did the Hebrew prophet Zechariah, the Jain teacher, Mahavira, and several other religious teachers of that same ancient and wise era.

Now, clearly I am talking about wounds of the heart, or wounds of the soul, if you will. And perhaps this wounding of the heart business sounds like a rather fluffy subject over here in the isolated United States. After all, the world outside our country experiences physical violence and physical wounding every day, wounding that seems much more real to some folk.

Children are wounded by land mines. Stray bullets in a dozen wars kill hundreds every hour. Emergency rooms are filled by the wounded blown out of exploded buses. And from certain central African nations to

modern China, real physical wounds are a common part of daily life. Such wounds in the body may seem a lot more horrific, on the surface, than does the wounded heart or soul.

But, as I said last week, I think trying to divide the human soul from the human body, as if they were two entirely different things, which just accidentally occupy the same place at the same time is very destructive theology. The soul is one way of talking about human life, the body another, but they are describing one singular reality. We are whole persons, not two separate species stuffed into the same skin. And thus I am convinced that wounds to the soul affect the body, and wounds to the body affect the soul. Both hurt, and such hurt can shape or even distort a life. And our lives, I maintain, help shape the world we live in. So my contemplation about wounds this morning does have some urgency to it, even though we live in the relatively peaceful United States.

But talking about physical wounds does bring me to my first point. One of the features of the human body is its amazing capacity to heal itself. Wounds want to heal. Even if the doctor never comes, and you have to bandage yourself, wounds tend to heal on their own. Even if the wound is deep, the body has an amazing power to re-knit itself. And in a surprisingly short time. Anyone who has ever had surgery can attest to this.

Of course, the whole idea of medical surgery suggest that it doesn't make sense to characterize all wounds *negatively*. For example, most surgery causes a wound to the body, but these wounds are made to *encourage healing and recovery*, not pain. Likewise, a good therapist, or good friend who loves you enough to hold a mirror up to you so you can really see yourself...well, it may hurt at first, but the end is wholeness and health, not pain. So, as far as I am concerned, the heart, or the soul, *wants* to heal from its wounds. And it *can* heal from its wounds, just as much as a body can. I cannot imagine a wound to the soul that cannot heal, if it is treated and allowed to get better. Yes, there may be scars, but a scar is merely a sign that healing has indeed taken place.

Most heart wounds are not like surgery, however. They are simply pains in the soul. They are hurt and harm. Often, they are not deliberately caused, but are the result of the mindless hurting of those who have become so insensitive to human realities that they wound others all day long, and never know it. But, as the Hebrew prophet Zechariah pointed out in the quotation I offered you at the top of the order of service, sometimes even friends can wound other friends.

What do I mean by a wound of the heart or soul? If you grew up and never heard any expression of love or tenderness, you may have felt this painful lack as a wound to the heart. When a boss, a teacher, a spouse or acquaintance dismisses you, belittles you, treats your ideas or feelings without any respect, you may have experienced *this* as wounding. Betrayal wounds deeply: you know, a friend or family member who has lied to you. Sometimes people we love seem to turn on us, and that hurts deeply. A broken love affair can wound. So can aspects of a broken marriage. And *any* experience of violence, including domestic violence, can wound the soul as well as the body. Being blamed for everything wounds. Fanatical and self-righteous religion can wound. Losing a job for almost any reason wounds. Being ridiculed or fenced in by sarcasm wounds. People saying to you “You must have no sense of humor. We’re just having fun,” this wounds. Unconscious racism wounds. And racism isn’t either a feeling or a person, but a system built into the texture of American life. Unconscious sexism wounds. Again, a whole system, not a person. People rushing to sign the malicious and bigoted Defense of Marriage Act in Ohio wounds.

Unresolved grief issues can wound. Sometimes a relative we love is drunk or in a dry drunk rage, and pushes all of our buttons with vile and accusatory language. This can wound us very deeply. A bitter fight, the loss of a friend to a fanatic religion, all of these can leave deep wounds.

And of course there are the terrible wounds some children experience, where the physical wound and the soul wound are hard to distinguish. I’ve heard many adults tell about their childhood, how they were

strapped, punched, beaten, constantly screamed at, or even sexually abused.

All of these events can really change a life, reshape it, even distort it. And any of you who has ever felt *the pain of a physical wound* knows just how much that pain eclipses and distorts everything else going on in your life. The same thing can often be true of soul pain. It can distort and deform reality. You no longer see what you see, or hear what you hear.

However, remember my first point. Wounds are not *supposed* to be permanent. The body and the mind *want* to heal. They want equilibrium and wholeness. They are not, in and of themselves, interested in remaining wounded and hurt. And so wounds that are given basic treatment and are *allowed* to heal *will* actually heal eventually.

However, sometimes adults, like little children picking at a scab on their knee, poke at their wounds. Revisit them over and over. And eventually, as Ruth Stone suggests in her poem, people can *become* their wounds. The unhealed wound grows, and grows eyes and mouth, in Stone's horrific image, and speaks and expresses itself almost as a separate human being. A person *becomes* their wound, wincing at any one or anything that reminds them of their pain. A person who has become their wound is not living their life any more, but acting out forever the moment of the wounding. They have stopped in time, and are not moving forward, like a film loop that replays forever. This is where an old proverb I like to quote makes so much sense..."either forgive or relive"... forever. Unless a wound is allowed to heal, good people end up missing out on whole portions of their lives.

A child can pick at a scab...that's easy to understand. But how does a person pick at a soul wound, and keep it raw?

I think it's by asking impossible-to-answer questions. You know, "Why did this happen to me?" Or "How could someone do something like this?" Or "What is the Spiritual Meaning of this pain?"

I don't know why it happened to you. I can't imagine why someone would do such a thing. I am not sure what cosmic meaning there can be in such suffering.

Which is why, undoubtedly, the Buddha told the story of the man wounded by a poison arrow. Instead of taking the arrow out, and treating it, the man is asking questions that cannot be answered. "Was this man who shot me a prince or a beggar? Tall or short? Young or old?"

All of these questions delay the possibility of healing. You take the arrow out first, salve it, wrap it up, and then, when you have begun to heal, if you really need to, you can reflect on other things.

But even then, not too much, for some questions simply cannot be answered in this lifetime. The question "Is the universe finite or infinite?" is just like the question "Why did this happen to me?" There is no real way that I can see to answer such a query.

So my second point this morning is that it's important to learn not to pick at our wounds and keep them raw.

My third point is this question. Since a wound will heal if you let it, just how is that accomplished when we are talking about a soul wound, or a heart wound? After all, a physical wound can be dressed with salve or might be sewn up with stitches. What kind of first aid can you give to the wounded heart?

My answer is this. First, you name a wound as a wound. You do not deny it's there. You fight off feeling ashamed of it, or having to explain it away to others. Remember, everyone else around you is wounded too. You have not been singled out. They may hide their wounds and pretend everything is ok, but make-believe is not reality. Name the reality, and healing can begin.

Second, you apply salve or get stitches by talking about it with a therapist, or a good sensible friend, or a trusted minister, or priest or rabbi.

Third, you let the healing powers of the spirit flow by meditation or prayer that focuses on the health, not the suffering. I don't care what kind of meditation or prayer, and I don't care what your theology is. However you give your wound spaciousness and time to heal signs a fine prayer in my book...whether you are reading a poem, talking to your inner God, walking in the quiet sun, or sitting in a yoga position...makes no difference. What's important is that you find some way to turn toward health and wholeness and away from the focus on the pain and hurt.

Fourth, you avoid picking at the wound by refusing to pursue impossible questions. This is a way of getting out of the wound's way and letting it heal as it wants to.

And I promise you, eventually the wound will heal.
Every one of them.

And, even once you are healed, you will get other wounds. As I said earlier, wounding is just part and parcel with life. Good people inadvertently hurt other people. Unquestioned systems wound people. Insensitive people wound people. And so do so called sensitive people, sometimes.

The game of insult and injury that I played with my friends in college may not have ultimately helped me deal with my wounds because it made me insensitive to my own wounds and to the wounds of others. But I think the game *did* reveal what Buddha taught so long ago, that life and wounding go hand in hand.

And as the Buddha put it so simply that long ago, "When you are wounded, treat the wound first. Everything else comes second."

And such an attitude toward our wounds, he said, makes for the living of a good and wise life.

I, for one, agree.

Offertory

May we support this house of wholeness
by wholehearted giving, reminding ourselves
that, together, we share the responsibility with these graceful beams of
holding up this beautiful gable over our heads.

Prayer for Healing

May I never, Oh Blessed Spirit of My life,
count my wounds as signs of my worthiness,
but only as evidence of my common humanity.
May I learn to trust the healing that hides
within the folds of my heart,
and trust that such healing is just as real
as the beat of my heart.
May I open myself to the healing
found in the community of human souls
which all have known wounding.
May I begin to heal, beginning today.
Beginning now. Beginning with this Amen.