

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Barbara R. Cunningham, associate minister at First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 20, October 25, 2009, dedicated to the glory of God!*

# ***“Together in Suffering and Healing”***

***Jeremiah 31:7-9; Mark 10:46-52***

***(Part II of IV in the sermon series “Together”)***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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When you are walking down the street or driving down the highway, How often do you see someone asking for a handout? What is generally your response?

We see through our media the “protection” of famous persons from anyone who is not “dressed correctly” or whom we know to be always on the street, and we see them held back from the famous ones. So it isn’t hard to imagine Bartimaeus calling out for Jesus – especially when he had heard so much about his healing power.

Jesus was “protected” by his disciples, even when he didn’t need to be. This was his last act of healing before his crucifixion and he healed without even touching the man. Bartimaeus’ faith had made him whole and he left

his meager belongings and followed the man who had declared him whole. Perhaps that is a metaphor for us leaving what possessions we have behind. Letting go! He was not in a church building, he was in the presence of God out in the open. He had faith that if he could just get the attention of Jesus, he could ask for healing and receive it.

If we believe in something so strongly, will that make it happen? I don't know the answer to that question because I doubt that I have ever believed in anything so strongly. So many doubts come creeping in – even though I think I believe. However, what I do know is that we are together in our suffering and in our healing. We are not always physically together, but we are together in prayer and in community.

I know that many of us do not feel nearly as good as we look. Being dressed up, or in a robe that hides a lot, seated in orderly pews does not always make us feel as good as we look. Sometimes we are here to find healing, hoping for a voice that tells us everything will be okay. We want to believe like Bartimaeus. We want to find healing for whatever hurts.

The healing I know about comes when I open myself to others, to share hurts, and to be comforted by another. We do not have to be in a church building, or even in the same city to care for and comfort one another.

This week, my closest friend in California lost her sister. I have known both of them since college, and Mary K and I became close when I lived in southern California. She is one I can call and always feel like we never are far apart. She has been with me in some very important, painful times – through my mastectomy for one. We comfort each other 2,500 miles away from each other. It would be better for me to be closer to her right now, but it doesn't stop my love and care.

Being together with this community has many benefits. I don't come to church because I believe it is the only place to find God. God is everywhere. I come to church to be a part of a loving community, to work together with others to make the world a better place and in

the process, to make my life a better life. Can I ever have the faith that Bartimeaus had? I don't know, but I want to keep working at it.

The word I'd like to emphasize here today is together. Our children heard about this earlier and are here to together with us. Together we can accomplish so much more than we can alone. Sometimes we think we can do it all by ourselves, but we wear out very quickly, or we only accomplish a little bit, or we worry about what others will think if we're not doing it all, or sometimes a person in charge believes he is the only one with an answer. Sometimes we learn from the simplest minds that aren't cluttered with judgment.

Let's talk about working together. First of all, one of the best ways to help another person is not to give the answer, but just be with that person. There is a heart-rending scene in the movie *Forrest Gump*. Jenny, the childhood friend of the mentally challenged Forrest Gump, has come home from one of her many self-destructive prodigal escapades. She and Forrest go to the now deteriorating house she used to live in. She is so upset with all the memories of abuse and hate that went on inside, that she begins to throw rocks at the house. She throws everything she can find. Screaming as she throws, she finally falls to the ground exhausted. Forrest moves lovingly toward her, picks her up and holds her as he says, "Jenny, sometimes there are just not enough rocks!"

Just being there – no answer needed. All of us come sometimes in our lives to the edge of things, where we are met by a sense of the inescapable and there is no place to hide. Sometimes we are not free to choose whether we are knocked down; we are only free to choose whether or not we will get up. To have a community of faith with us is particularly important in these times, not to tell us what to do, but to be there with us. We cannot be there if we do not know!

The second thing community does is help us reach out to God's world – yes it is God's world. We build our beautiful churches, come to worship with a familiar ritual, and the world goes on around us. God is in the world – not just in this place. Community, togetherness, helps us live in this world at other times when we are not in this building.

A few years ago, when I was the pastoral minister of another church, I went to visit a woman who was not a member of our church in her home. She was struggling with disease and nearing death. I introduced myself with my title of minister of pastoral care, and her first question was, “What is pastoral care”? My simple answer was this: it is sharing life with persons in their most meaningful moments – in pain, in sorrow, in joy and excitement. There is no greater honor than to be trusted with those moments. We cried together, we prayed for strength, we held on to each other – we touched one another deeply that day. She was a child of God in the outside world – outside the formal church.

We do not know what is happening in the lives of those around us unless we take time to ask. We cannot live out the commandment to love each other as I have loved you unless we know what it is to love and how to relate. We cannot do it only in the confines of this “sacred place.” The world is God’s world.

Thirdly, we need to take responsibility for our lives. We ask, “Who is in charge?” How often do we blame God for the bad and praise God for the good things?

When the towers were hit in New York City, one of my sisters said to me, “Isn’t it good that God kept all those people home today?”

Why would a loving God be responsible for the evil of fanatic human behavior – those who wanted to kill some of us? Why would some be saved? God does not cause these events. When we are open to love, we will not be irresponsible as these people were.

On the lighter side of responsibility, we learn it when we are young. There can be a lightness to our lives. We need to learn to laugh, even in the times of the worst going on in our world. We can take responsibility for ourselves, laugh at ourselves and cry when needed.

Speaking of taking responsibility, and finding out who is really in charge, I am reminded of the story about the minister who called the home of one of his parishioners, and the answer on the phone

was a whispered “Hello.” It was a small voice, so the minister asked, “Can you speak up?”

“No, I have to be very quiet.”

“Is your mommy there?”

“Yes, but she’s busy.”

“Is your daddy there?”

“Yes, but he’s busy.”

“Is there another adult there?”

“There is a fireman, but he’s talking to my mom, and there is a policeman, but he’s talking to my dad.”

The minister definitely gets the feeling something is wrong, and he asked the little girl what happened.

“Oh, nothing. They’re just looking for me!!”

Who is really in charge here? Not God, but I’m sure a lesson was learned. I tell this story because we often get distracted and blame God when things go right or wrong, when it really is up to us to be in charge with God’s guidance. (I imagine that little girl got a lot of parental guidance later)

Jack Reimer wrote answers to questions we all ask of God, only he helped by giving us the responsibility for making the world a better place. We have to jump up and let go of the cloaks of blind trust to experience the newness of life. He wrote:

“We cannot merely pray to God to end war; we know that God has made the world in a way that we must find our own path to peace within ourselves and with our neighbors;

“We cannot merely pray to God to end starvation; God has given us the resources with which to feed the world if we would only use them wisely;

“We cannot merely pray to God to root out our prejudice, for God has already given us eyes with which to see the good in all persons if we would only use them rightly;

“We cannot merely pray to God to end despair, for God has already given us the power to clear away slums and to give hope if we would only use our power justly;

“We cannot merely pray to God to end disease, for God has already given us great minds with which to search out cures and healing if we would only use them constructively;

“Therefore we pray to God instead, for strength, determination and willpower to do – instead of just to pray, to be – instead of merely to wish.”

We are not protected from pain, but we are loved through it in order for us to love others through life. God loves us unconditionally. As a community we love each other, and together reach out to the world.

So to be together in suffering and healing we are to:

- \* Listen and learn from each other, giving support in suffering.
- \* Recognize God in the world, not just in this place and in our way of worship.
- \* Take responsibility for ourselves in acting out our faith.

Living together in suffering and healing, loving each other as Christ loved us, may mean acceptance without judgment, suffering pain, anger, hurt and resentment without letting it destroy us, letting go of less important things to live life as it is with each other,

knowing this life is only temporary. Agape means accepting responsibility to do – not just to be!

Let us pray: For the grace of your love, O God, no matter who we are, we give you thanks. Keep us mindful that only when we love as you have loved us will we experience true peace. Amen.

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