

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Barbara R. Cunningham,
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to the glory of God!*

“The Rest of the Story”

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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.

Hurry up! We’re going to be late! Where’s my other shoe? I can’t find my keys. Soccer practice is in ten minutes. Well my ballet is in five minutes. I have a list-hurry. Grocery shop before work. Get to work on time. No time. Hurry, hurry. Whew!

The disciples didn’t get it, and we don’t get it! They didn’t save time to rest – to eat. They shared all of their accomplishments. They did not rest. Take a moment now, clear your mind, rest, body posture. Thoughts – that crazy women preacher – what is she doing? This isn’t a sermon! Today’s lesson is about resting and healing, taking care of ourselves so that we can be better to each other.

Rest.

We fear rest because our scars might show, our weaknesses might rise to the top. About this surgery –

- rest
- not doing too much
- accepting the love of others

- caring enough to care for yourself, myself.

Rest comes from a healthy sense of self. The ability to look honestly at ourselves – show our scars and slow down and rest. To forgive ourselves and others. We say we want the energy of a child. Well, children take rests in the middle of the day and they rest.

There are a few things I'd like to focus on here; resting, healing, scars and forgiving. I'd like to talk a bit about the scars that we are known by and the new life breathed into us by the love of God and each other.

Just as Christ was known by his scars, we are better known to each other by our scars. While we rejoice with another person in their successes, what we remember about someone is the pain they have gone through. If we have experienced similar pain, we almost feel theirs as we acutely remember ours.

So many times when someone comes to me in great pain, seeking healing, wondering about the healing love of God, they feel they should not talk about their pain with others. It is, in their eyes, complaining, or being too open about personal things. Responses from people who have not suffered in the same way have caused them to withdraw.

I knew a woman in Seattle who had been assaulted in her own backyard at 10 in the morning. It was a terrible thing. Through a good counselor and a loving husband and family, she made her way back to emotional health.

One day she called me, telling me that her counselor, as part of her therapy, wanted her to tell someone other than a family member or a pastor what had happened to her, wanted for her to articulate for someone else her tragedy. When I asked her who she would tell (thinking it would be me), she said, much to my surprise, "Joe Smith."

Joe was a sometimes recovering (often not recovering) alcoholic. In the four years that I had known him, Joe had held and lost four jobs. So I asked her why she wanted to tell Joe, and her reply was, "Because Joe knows what it's like to go to hell and live to tell about it."

We are known by our scars. Somebody whom the world regards as a failure bears the wounds that may lead to another's wholeness. Maybe the only way we get healed is sharing our wounds, and through the woundedness of others.

In 1991, I had breast cancer and had to have a mastectomy. That scar is hidden to you, unless I tell you about it. Some of you have heard me tell of it before, and some may wonder why I say it out loud. When I have publicly told my story, almost without fail two or three women within the next week call me to tell of their experience with breast cancer. Somehow there is an understanding that was not there before.

I now can tell funny stories about hospital experiences, and can laugh about being "disfigured," so telling my story is not to have anyone feel sorry for me. Telling my story helps you to know me better, leaves an opening for someone who has never told anyone about their experience to share with someone who has been there.

It reminds me of trying to teach someone how to tie shoe laces. You cannot write out the instructions easily – I suppose it can be done – but the better way is to sit down with someone and show them how to do it, walk them through it. Then it takes practice to learn.

Openness, a willingness to share our scars, to empty ourselves to another's vision and understanding, that is what brings wholeness to life. That is what brings wholeness to life! Being closed about what we have gone through, or to have a "know-it-all" attitude, separates us from one another and from the love of God.

Most spiritual traditions teach through parables to reach beyond our "know-it-all" nature and connect directly with the innocence we had as children. In a famous Zen parable, a college professor visits a monk to see whether the monk has anything to teach him. The monk pours tea for the professor, but just keeps pouring until the cup overflows. The professor jumps up in alarm, judging the monk a hopeless fool. The monk remarks calmly that the cup is like the professor's mind – already so full that nothing more can fit in.

If our minds are full of the belief that we are to be without fault or that we are not acceptable, we are kidding ourselves. The scars that Jesus shows us are scars caused by human error. Our scars can be shown without shame. Some are invisible to the outside world, yet when they become visible, they become healing for ourselves and sometimes for another person. We are not alone in this. And we can love, even when the scar tissue seems to be so thick we cannot move beyond it. Forgiveness is next in keeping our bodies and mind healthy.

There is a story about a man named Al who was a skilled artist, a potter. Al had a wife and two fine sons. One night, his oldest son developed a severe stomach ache. Thinking it was only some common intestinal disorder, neither Al nor his wife took the condition very seriously. But the malady was actually acute appendicitis, and the boy died suddenly that night.

Knowing the death could have been prevented if he had only realized the seriousness of the situation, Al's emotional health deteriorated under the enormous burden of his guilt. To make matters worse, his wife left him a short time later, leaving him with his 6-year-old younger son. The hurt and pain of the two situations were more than Al could handle, and he turned to alcohol to help him cope, and in time became an alcoholic. As time went on, he lost everything, and eventually died alone in a San Francisco motel room.

Many people thought of him as a complete failure with a totally wasted life. But one friend of Al's knew his younger son Ernie, who was the kindest, most caring, most loving man that the friend had ever known. He watched Ernie with his children and saw the free flow of love between them, and he knew that the kindness and caring had to have been learned somewhere.

One day the friend asked Ernie what his father Al had done to help him become the special person he was. Ernie said, "From my earliest memories as a child until I left home at 18, Al came into my room every night, gave me a kiss and said, 'I love you son.'"

Al had not left material things behind, but he had been a loving father and left behind one of the finest, most giving men. His scars did not destroy his ability to love. Every day he breathed new life into his son with his love.

For some, scar tissue may not be removable to save their own emotional being, but it doesn't have to prevent love. Showing our pain, the scars of the past, the hurt of the present, is a way of healing. Being together and sharing our scars is to consciously stop, breathe deeply and to practice bringing the awareness of God's spirit alive in our hearts. It is okay to ask others to help us heal. Learning how to keep God's strength coming into our lives is constant, and we need each other to do it. It is too bad Al couldn't forgive himself.

If we wait for a firm intellectual belief in the existence of God before we act in faith, if we wait until we think we have "perfected" ourselves before we entrust ourselves to others and to God's care, we will never grow. Those who try to acquire belief through proof and effort will likely never believe. It is in letting go, in sharing our humanness, our scars, that we become real.

God loves us anyway. Perhaps it is in loving ourselves enough to give ourselves another a chance to heal, a chance to learn by our experience that God's love becomes real. Sharing our scars and giving forgiveness is breathing into another new life. This becomes our purpose as we seek to empower people with the love of God as we know it. Can we forgive ourselves when we make mistakes?

So today, we as Christians must learn to take care of ourselves through rest, healing, forgiveness and sharing of ourselves openly and without doubt that God's love surrounds us – sometimes only experienced outwardly through another person, through quietness and through sharing.

Let us pray.

In times of doubt and questioning, oh God, when our scars are keeping us from new learning, new thought, when our faith is limited by our belief in what others will say, by mysteries beyond our understanding, grant us the faithfulness and courage to

examine ourselves, to share our scars, to be enlightened with fresh truth made known to us, and to share in love with those around us, just as the Christ shared the scars and new life in the spirit. Amen.

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