

“Seized by Tenderness”

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; II Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

Part four of the sermon series,

“Revive Us Again: A Return to Jesus’ Original Program”

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From the Pulpit

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A Communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, World Communion Sunday, Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 22, October 2, 2022, dedicated to the blessed memory of Barbara Knox, to Mark Williams who returns from sabbatical today, to Jose and Fr. Gregory Boyle and all the men, women, teens and children in Homeboy Industries in LA, to Rev. Joanna Samuelson, Barry Moenter and Jim Gallagher as they step forward in interim leadership, to Dr. Greg Halbe and the Deacons of First Church who serve us faithfully each week, to all devastated and effected by Hurricane Ian, and always to the glory of God!

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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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In *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*, Jesuit priest, Father Greg Boyle tells the story of Jose, one of the street gang members who came to Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles. Jose was a trainee and had been with Homeboy Industries a short time when Father Boyle (affectionately known as “G”) took him on a speaking

engagement to a room filled with 600 social workers. “G” asked Jose to tell his story – a story G had truthfully never heard before.

Jose began, “My mom and me didn’t get along so good. When I was six years old, she said to me, “why don’t you just kill yourself – you’re such a burden to me.” As the room filled with compassionate people gasped, Jose continued, “Don’t worry, it sounds much worse in Spanish.” His mother would beat him constantly. When he was 9, she drove him into the Baja desert and dropped him at an orphanage there saying that she found this boy along the road. He was there for six months until his grandmother was finally able to find out where her daughter had left him. Grandma came and got him and brought him home.

When he returned, the beatings began again. He continued, “My mother beat me every single day. It was so bad that I wore three t-shirts to school – the first to seep up the blood, the second to catch any blood that might seep through the first shirt and then the third – where you couldn’t see the blood. The kids would make fun of me because I was wearing three t-shirts in 100 degree heat. But I didn’t care. I had to.”

Then he paused to catch his breath through his tears. He continued, “I wore three t-shirts well into my adult years because I was ashamed of my wounds. I didn’t want anyone to see the wounds and my scars. One day, I came to realize my wounds are my friends. After all, how can I help heal the wounded if I can’t heal my own wounds? I learned that my own compassion for others lies in this: If I don’t welcome my own wounds, I may be tempted to despise and hate others who are wounded.”

In his 2021 book, *“The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness,”* Fr. Boyle calls us all to speak and live the whole language of God which means we need to embrace the power of extravagant tenderness. Tenderness is the highest form of spiritual fluency. In our tenderness, we go to the margins and meet people in their woundedness. In our tenderness, we get to stand with the demonized so the demonizing will stop. You can’t demonize people you know. In tenderness, we are present with the disposable so they will no longer be thrown away. You can’t throw away people you know. When you go to the margins, other voices end up getting heard. If it’s true that a traumatized person is more likely to find their ways to traumatize others, it is equally true that a cherished person will be able to find their way to cherish themselves and then cherish others.

Fr. Boyle tells about an experience with Fr. Henri Nouwen which happened years before, while they were at Harvard Divinity School together. Fr. Nouwen was asked, “What is ministry?” He thought about it and then responded, “Can you receive people?” Each of us is called to ministry wherever we are, whoever we are, however we are. Each of us gets to answer in our own ways and in our own places, “can I receive people?” And we will find in living fully into the tenderness of God that we will experience God’s comfort. As God comforts us, there is no time left for judgment. In that place, we can receive people.

Fr. Boyle tells the story of Congressman John Lewis. John Lewis once said, “We all live in the same house.” No one assigns us places in the house. We all live in this house together. If we think of this way, that means, we all come to the table together. We all sit at the table together. We all receive God’s blessings here together. We all

meet Jesus here – together. We find, when we do, that Jesus shows us again what really matters – Inclusion really matters. Nonviolence really matters. Unconditional love really matters. Compassionate acceptance of one another really matters. These four elements are what Jesus is all about – inclusion, nonviolence, unconditional love and compassionate acceptance – all connected by tenderness.

Getting to tenderness can be really hard when we are stressed out, fearful or closed off to others. Think about this – we can't make room for tenderness when we are trying to get something or protect something. We have to be open to get to tenderness.

In our scripture today, the prophet cries out, “How long, O Lord! Why don't you intervene!” How many times have we joined Habakkuk in this desperate lament? In the midst of his lament, God calls Habakkuk to set forth a vision and run to it (and not to run away from it). Moving toward a vision means laments become quieter and praise becomes greater.

Habakkuk is our lead-in to Jesus' disciples' entreaty, “Lord, increase our faith!” What a request! What are they really asking for? Are they requesting irrefutable proof that Jesus is worthy of their trust? Are they, like Habakkuk, begging for help to believe in God's loving care while terrible things keep happening? Are they asking for the grace of greater fidelity?

Jesus, in his immense tenderness, wants them to have greater faith, a faith that spreads – like the mustard seed growing with rapid regeneration. Jesus tells the disciples, “You're not supposed to stop before you have completed everything.” For Jesus, faith is not a noun. It's a verb. He wants their faith to grow and grow and grow.

In I Timothy, Paul tells Timothy, “Stir into flame the gift of God you have received.” He goes on, “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather of power and love.” Again, the call of God is to run with the blessings you have already. Step into them. Don’t run away from them.

Today’s readings are all telling us that the very impatience and the passion with which we plea for God’s help are the signs that grain-of-mustard hope is truly alive in us; signs that we have more power than we think we have.

Perhaps, the very power that is growing in us is the power of tenderness. May tenderness grow like the mustard seed within us as we, and like Jose, may our wounds become our friends and guide us to embrace those around us who are wounded, too. May we all be seized by tenderness today. Amen.

