

**Centre Congregational Church, UCC
Brattleboro, Vermont
Sunday, 1 July 2018
“Wounded Together, Healing Together”
Hebrew Scripture: Psalm 1
Christian Scripture: Mark 5:21-43**

I greet you all in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Appreciation for welcome and hospitality]

[Collect Prayer]

I think I will begin my remarks this morning like David and Priscilla and note the warm weather. If I had a dollar for every time someone has commented to me that I have brought to Vermont the heat and humidity from Florida during the past two days, Anne might not have to pay my salary for a few months! Though it is exceeding warm, I am so pleased that so many of you have welcomed me this morning and come to worship on this special day. Ministers in Florida, such as my friend Bryan [Fulwider], employ some humorous excuses to explain why preaching is unpersuasive and their church attendance is sometimes low. There ministers often lament that during the Florida winters, the weather is so beautiful that any minister has difficulty convincing people that

heaven is more appealing. And during the Florida summers, which it is now, it is *so bloody hot* and humid that the minister has difficulty convincing people that hell is particularly terrifying! Well, no matter that it is hot today here, it is a blessing and an honor to finally be here, at Centre Congregational Church in Brattleboro, Vermont! I thank you that so many are here.

I imagine that attendance is so high this Sunday because you might wish to hear the prospective minister's ideas on how to 'grow the church'. Well, I thought I should not disappoint. My first idea was that this Sunday I should begin a *year-long* sermon series on the forty weeks of Daniel. Fortunately, as you can see from the gospel reading, David discouraged me from implementing that idea. My second idea was that in order to feel relevant, I should pepper the service with contemporary expressions. For example, "Let us open our hymnals and sing a dope hymn" or "Thank you, choir, that anthem was lit!" However, Jim told me that Clyde and Bill might not find that very appealing. In June, while in Washington, D.C. when the Capitals won the Stanley Cup, I had the great idea to ask Mary to play hockey cheers at pivotal moments during my sermons. [Mary plays organ chant.] How did that go? But, my best idea is inspired in Florida where toll roads are ubiquitous: I thought I would please Anne by announcing that in order to raise funds for the church, tolls

will now be charged for using the bathrooms. [I hold up sign for bathroom toll.] So, those are my ideas for increased church growth! So, who's with me?! Amen!

Though I joke about it this morning, the topic of 'church attendance and growth' is important. To benefit our church, our community and the furtherance of the gospel and the kingdom of God, it is important that our membership and budget grow. But it is far more important that our faith grows, that is, it deepens, becomes and more relevant. So, this morning, I am asking us, "Where do we go from here; what do we propose to do together from this day forth?" This morning, may I propose that we gather here to be intimately accountable in relationship, in solidarity, with one another. I propose that we develop and deepen relationships with one another and Christ in order to follow Him more faithfully.

You know, I fibbed earlier about the lack of attendance at Florida churches. This year's edition of the Christian think-tank 'BarnaTrends' examines 'Who's (Still) in Church'? Vermont scores as the state that has the highest percent of the country's unchurched people at 59%.¹ Now there is no reason to single out Vermont; Vermont is part of a historic and a national trend whereby

¹ "Who's (Still) in Church", *BarnaTrends 2017: What's New and What's Next at the Intersection of Faith and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016, p. 149.

memberships and budgets of mainline Protestant denominations, like the United Church of Christ (UCC), have been shrinking since the 1960s! One could say there has been a decline since the nineteenth century when Friedrich Nietzsche declared that ‘God is dead’. We are living in a post-modern world wherein developing countries are becoming more secularized; increased technology and mobility are fuelling people’s estrangement from the church. 30% of millennials (or young adults such as my son, Micah) say that church is not at all important to them.² Why? The reasons for their absence are that, one, the church is not relevant; two, they can find God elsewhere; three, church is boring; four, God is missing from church; and five, the church is out of date.³ While there is no ‘silver bullet’ that will enable us to stop ‘the bleeding’, I believe that relationships are the key to making the Christian faith relevant in people’s lives. Hebrews 10:24-25 reads, “And let us consider how to spur one another on to love and good deeds. Let us not neglect meeting together [...] let us encourage one another”. Our reading from Mark suggests many barriers to relationship that prevent genuine healing and deepening faith.

² *BarnaTrends 2017*, pp. 159.

³ *BarnaTrends 2017*, pp. 152-164.

In our scripture reading from Mark, we hear two stories. The first is about Jairus, a synagogue leader and the second is about a bleeding woman. Both stories relate how each desperately overcomes barriers to reach Jesus.

For Jairus, a quick review of Mark's gospel is helpful. Throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus worried about being seen as a threat to the religious authorities. In chapters one through five, all the of following occurs: Jesus feared that unclean spirits will advertise his healing powers (1:34) and thereafter he avoided towns (1:45), Jesus felt further under threat by forgiving sins, Jesus encountered opposition from religious leaders for eating with sinners (2:15), he endured criticism for working on the Sabbath (3:2) and even members of his family and hometown looked away embarrassed (6:3-4)! Jesus was walking, throughout the countryside, wounded.

It makes perfect sense that Jairus, a synagogue leader, would hesitate to reach-out to Jesus. The reasons why are endless: protocol, opposition from within his congregation and then loss of income, and disfavour from other synagogue leaders and thus loss of standing. Both Jairus *and* Jesus had good reason to avoid one another; both overcame great anxieties to find each other.

In our second story, again, we have a big crowd, and it prevented the bleeding woman from reaching Jesus. Why would the crowd be a barrier? Well, everyone around her considered this woman a pariah. She was cruelly marginalised for being a woman in a patriarchal society, for being unclean, and, from the vantage of first century Judaism, was considered cursed by God. She risked the wrath of all, even Jesus, to reach him. Do you not see it? What a gamble!

What we can glean from these two stories is that Jesus, Jairus and the bleeding woman were all *wounded and healed together*. Jairus experienced a deep well of pain from the death of beloved daughter, with whom he shared ‘butterfly kisses’. The bleeding woman experienced a deep well of pain from poverty, illness and marginalization. And Jesus experienced life-threatening opposition and abandonment by others. Yet, each made one another more whole by their respective encounters.

So, that is my proposal; my proposal is for us to be vulnerable enough to be *wounded together so that we can be healed together*. The prophet Isaiah describes the Kingdom of God as a great mass healing of both the Earth and of us: “‘Water will flow in the desert’” causing the crocuses to grow where they otherwise would not. The

contemporary theologian describes Isaiah's vision (35:5-6) as "an outbreak of human wholeness" when "The eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf will be unstopped, the limbs of the human beings will no longer be lame, [...] and the voices of the mute will once again be heard'" (35:5-6).⁴ Is that not in fact what we want in our church, community and world?! I propose that we at Centre Congregational Church bring our brokenness to one another in genuine and intimate relationships, so that we may be reconciled to one another and thus reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. And we will begin, this morning, this relationship by celebrating Holy Communion, probably the most profound act of fellowship, reconciliation and solidarity between God and us that can be expressed.

I recently attended a seminar sponsored by the Florida Conference of the UCC. One woman lamented that local churches are often 'not real'. She despaired that churches often, and understandably, do not want to deal with, what she called, the 'tough stuff'. Many churches have morphed into what Spong refers

⁴ John Shelby Spong, *Unbelievable: Why Neither Ancient Creeds Nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today*, (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), 58.

to as ‘feel-good places that avoid controversy and critical thought to concentrate on [just] easing their people’s way through life”.⁵

What drew me to Centre Church is its wrestling with that ‘tough stuff’. When I first read the church profile and read of your local and international outreach, I knew I would be like a mosquito on a nudist beach - I would not know which way to turn! The local paper recently featured the Reusable Bag Program, our cooperation with Loaves and Fishes and our own meal program. During my last interview with the search committee, I heard about your recent efforts to hear one another’s testimonies. I said, “I want to be a part of that!” You see, so often people in church wear ‘masks’ - they are walking Facebook posts - and they portray facades. But, if we come to church and fail to risk dealing with the ‘tough stuff’ of life we will only be allowing our covered-up wounds to fester. We all have testimonies to share that express what separates us from Jesus and testimonies that bring us to Jesus and thus communicate our experiences that lead to us to that which is sacred.

Just as Jesus, Jairus and the bleeding woman all carried wounds, we also are hurting deeply from the loss of loved ones. Many of us are wounded by divorce. We all have dysfunctional

⁵ Spong, *Unbelievable*, 11-12.

families to one degree or another. Many of us struggle every day with patriarchy. Though we attend an Open and Affirming and Just Peace church, there is still much work to ensure that all people are not the pejorative 'other'. We all are or soon will struggle with the grief of aging. We all are or soon will strive to cope with a debilitating illness or the negative manifestations of accident injuries.

So, what are we going to do? For us to be a church that is relevant to the church, the un-church and those wounded by the church, we must be relevant *to one another and to others*. That means we must be in relationship, not just ecclesiastic acquaintances during coffee hour. We must be in intimate solidarity with one another and with those outside our church. We need to be real with one another, confessing our sins and our dysfunctions, confiding our wounds and being proactive about supporting and discerning how to go forward in faith. That is the church being the church! Relevant through relationships.

I look forward to sharing and living out my spiritual autobiography with you. I pray you will look forward to sharing and living-out your spiritual autobiographies with me. I want to hear your testimonies. They will inspire me to greater faith. I look

forward to being in relationship with you. I look forward to each of us serving one another. I look forward to walking forward in faith with you, just as Jairus and the bleeding woman did with Jesus. In relationship, in solidarity: Wounded together, healing together.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded: Amen!