

The Third Sunday of Easter
Luke 24:36b-48

The Wounded Healer^{*}

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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Many of you have probably seen a remarkable statue that is only two blocks north of our parish. It's called "When I Was Hungry and Thirsty," and it sits right in front of St. Francis of Assisi Church on West 31st Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. I walk by it all the time.

The bronze statue depicts a life-sized figure sitting on the sidewalk, hunched over with the legs criss-crossed. The figure is entirely covered by a blanket, and so you can't see the face. One hand is outstretched, as if the person is asking for a handout.

The most striking thing about the statue is that, when you gaze upon the outstretched hand, there is a large hole and scar in the middle of it. The wound is a stigmata – the mark of crucifixion. What looks like, at first glance, a homeless person begging for money, actually turns out to be the risen Christ sitting right before you.

The statue is quite realistic, and it can be unsettling to look at it closely. Timothy Schmalz, the Canadian artist who created the statue, says that he is "devoted to creating art that glorifies Christ." Here, the glory can be found in the wound that is right in the middle of the risen Christ's hand.

In today's gospel reading from Luke, the risen Christ invites his disciples to look closely at his hands and feet. When the disciples are gathered together post-resurrection, Jesus suddenly appears in their midst. He says to them, "Peace be with you." But they are startled and terrified. They are freaked out because they think they are seeing a ghost. In response, Jesus invites them to look at his hands and feet and to touch them. He says: "Look at my hands and my feet. . . . Touch me and see."

A similar invitation was in last week's gospel passage from John about Doubting Thomas. We usually associate that story with Thomas touching the wound in Jesus' side. However, the Doubting Thomas passage also talks about Thomas putting his finger in Jesus' hands, in order to touch "the mark of the nails."

These resurrection narratives raise two important questions. First, why does the risen Christ repeatedly invite his disciples to see and to touch his hands and feet? And, second, why weren't Jesus' hands and feet completely healed during the resurrection?

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Why were his hands and feet still scarred from the nails that were driven through them at the crucifixion?

In terms of the first question, Jesus invited his disciples to see and to touch his hands and feet in order to prove that he was not just a spirit or a ghost. It was proof of his bodily resurrection. That is, Jesus was truly raised from the dead. It's the same reason that Jesus asks for food and eats broiled fish in their presence. He wasn't just some ghost that had returned to the earthly realm in order to haunt or torment his disciples.

In terms of the second question, I believe that Jesus' hands and feet remained scarred after the resurrection because it was a graphic reminder to the disciples – and to us – that Jesus was a wounded healer. That is, even though Jesus was the resurrected Messiah who was brought back to life to heal others, his own scars remained. His glorified body still carried the marks of his wounds from the cross. Jesus was a wounded healer. And his disciples were witnesses to such things.

“Look at my hands and my feet.”

The concept of the wounded healer is often associated with Henry Nouwen, a Dutch scholar and priest who wrote some 39 books that were published in twenty languages. After teaching for many years as a professor of pastoral theology at Yale and Harvard, Nouwen spent the last ten years of his life living quietly in a community of disabled people in Toronto as their pastor.

According to Nouwen (who also happened to be a gay man), wounded healers are those healers who embrace the physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual wounds from their past. Instead of hiding, suppressing, or running away from these wounds, the wounded healers ask themselves the question: “How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?”

As the website of the Henry Nouwen Society puts it so beautifully: “When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and [they] become a source of healing, [then] we have become wounded healers.”

“Look at my hands and my feet.”

The archetype of the wounded healer appears in many places, and not just in pastoral ministry. Academic studies have shown that some of the most effective nurses, psychotherapists, and other health care professionals are those who are themselves wounded healers. And the wounded healer principle has been cited as a core principle of Alcoholics Anonymous. That is, people who are in recovery can use the understanding gained in their own healing in order to help others with the same condition.

Perhaps you have recognized that your own call to heal some part of this broken world arises out of your own woundedness. That your own effectiveness as a healer

comes not from running away from past trauma and shame, but by acknowledging it and transforming it.

The fact that Jesus invites his disciples to look at – and to touch – his wounds in today’s gospel shows us that Jesus is God’s wounded healer. The Latin word for wound is “vulnus,” and that’s where our word “vulnerable” comes from. Yes, it is true that we celebrate the triumph and power of the resurrection during these fifty days of Easter. But we must also remember the paradox that Jesus’ very power lies in the vulnerability of the cross.

For me, the cross is not just a sign of God’s wrath against a rebellious humanity or a legalistic penalty extracted for our sins. Rather, the cross is a loving sign of God’s solidarity with us in our deepest suffering. Through the cross, God says to us: “I understand your pain – I’ve been there” and “You are not alone.” This assurance is inscribed in the wounds of the risen Christ’s hands and feet. And, as followers of Christ, we are invited to model this vulnerability and to become wounded healers ourselves.

“Look at my hands and my feet.”

Later in the mass, we will gather before the high altar to partake of the Body of Christ that is literally broken for us. After the bread and wine is consecrated at the eucharistic prayer, Fr. van Dooren will break the host during the fraction rite. He will chant “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us,” holding the broken wafer in his hands. And we will all respond, “Therefore let us keep the feast.”

But it is not just the consecrated bread that is broken. We, too, as the Body of Christ, are also broken, with each of us carrying our own unique wounds from the past. When we gather together around the altar rail during communion, we will be infused with – and strengthened by – God’s amazing grace. And it is this healing grace that empowers us to go into the world to love and serve the Lord. We become wounded healers ourselves.

May you encounter the risen Christ this Easter season. And when you do, may you recognize Jesus as God’s wounded healer. And may you come to recognize that you, too, are God’s wounded healer.

“Look at my hands and my feet.”