

First Presbyterian Church
Rev. Charles M. Cary
Sermon: "Questions People Ask VII: Will the Wounds of History Ever Be Healed?"
August 20 2017
Luke 4: 10-30

Healing and reconciliation comes not by denying wrong, but when we draw upon God's help to name it and take responsibility to correct it.

Over a year ago while I was still the pastor at Westhampton, we welcomed to Sunday worship a youth group from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. They were Oglala Sioux and had never seen the eastern seaboard or the bright lights of New York City. One of the highlights was seeing the great Atlantic Ocean for the first time which caused several to dance with delight – even though the beach itself was vacant that cold day in March. The youth coordinator Kathy Tureski drove them on the church bus and fielded many questions about the Hampton's, one which I will never forget. They were trying to get their heads around the second home concept. One of the boys couldn't understand why anyone would build a house and not live in it? Dune Road was a culture shock in many ways. It does give one who lives here year-round pause to hear such a question.

It was also a season of the church year, Lent, when I had asked members of the church to read the Gospel in both their native language and English – to help us remember that God speaks to us in many ways. A young woman in their youth group was learning her original Lakota language. I asked her on Saturday if she would read the Scripture in her native tongue. At 16, she hesitated, naturally ill at ease to try something in an Anglo congregation she had never visited before. After some phone calls back home and after practicing with one of her chaperones, she did it. She was quite nervous, and read softly, haltingly – still trying to master what was difficult. I don't recall how it ended – whether or not we applauded. But, she deserved our applause and so much more. The thought occurred to me afterwards that Presbyterians like me were the teachers who discouraged her ancestors from speaking their native tongue. Missionaries did not allow indigenous language. While she spoke I detected a ripple of impatience in the congregation. I wish I had the presence of mind to name that impatience and call for sober reflection. Hindsight being what it is, I wish I had thought to remind the good folk of the Westhampton Church that hearing the Gospel in the words of the Lakota language was a reminder of past errors – past cruelties. Past wounds, which have never fully healed. If I was impatient when hearing the Gospel in a language I did not understand, think of the many peoples forced to hear it in language they could not understand!

Scott Lewis poses the question for today's sermon – a question which in light of the Charlottesville violence- is even more relevant. Will the wounds of history ever be healed? Will the evils we deplore which demonize other people, ever be completely erased? Or are we left with a society deeply, painfully paralyzed by hate, fear, and misunderstanding? Is there a word from the Lord this morning-...an answer to Scott's question, and a divine response to the conflict at the University of Virginia?

The first stop on the way to my answer is wrestling with the text – the passage for this morning. It is a story in which Jesus returns home to the synagogue where He learned the Faith. To Nazareth – where a crowd of homefolks were waiting – swollen with pride at His achievements. You can hear and see them. "Yes – I remember when Jesus was just a boy – at work in Joseph's carpenter shop! How wonderful to have him back where it all started!" They invite Jesus to read Scriptures which He does – from the scroll of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me: He has anointed me to: bring good news to the poor. Sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind: To let the oppressed go free. And announce the year of the Lord's favor!!" To top it off, Jesus says: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!!"

At this point Jesus could have had anything He wanted. Everyone was filled with joy, and thanksgiving. The mood was gracious. It doesn't get much better than this!

But what started in glee, soon turned to rage. What began with much love quickly turned to indignation. Jesus made everyone uncomfortable. He said God loved the outsiders. The great prophet Elijah only saved one widow – the non-Jew who lived at Zarephath in Sidon. Elisha the prophet – when he cleansed lepers – cleansed only one – Naaman the Syrian –an outsider. What Jesus said infuriated the crowd. They are so incensed that they

drive Him out of town –as if to hurl Him off a cliff! Healing the wounds of history is never easy. And it involves hearing a word which stirs our resistance more than our welcome.

Think of the persons you find it hardest to accept. Think of those on the outside of your circle of friends. Think of those who've often despised you, or whom you have despised. Think of persons wounded by the world's conflicts. Adversaries. Enemies. Outsiders. Those you believe are most undeserving of God's grace. Imagine Jesus describing an occasion when he blessed them! As if He were in a Jerusalem synagogue today – proclaiming in unwavering, decisive speech that the Palestinian militant received a blessing of God! Jesus lifts up a wounded history and instead of reinforcing walls, builds a bridge. Instead of condemning – he blesses. Instead of speaking in the calculated, measured language of suspicion, He proclaims how God sends mercy to your and my greatest adversary!

I am not naïve – healing the wounds of history is not for the sentimental or the faint of heart. But – neither is it for those incapable of hope. The wounds of our history – yours and mine, will not be healed through hate or violence, neither of which are Christ-like. How will they be healed - ? when God helps us to see our enemies the way God sees them, as reconciled friends. The irony is that Jesus was nearly crucified early for His prophetic work. Rejected by His own people, for proclaiming that the circle of God's love includes outsiders. In fact – the circle of God's love doesn't have room for such arbitrary language. His was the first heart to break witnessing the violence in Thomas Jefferson's hometown. Christ's was the first heart to break when a man drove a car into a crowd!

I am currently reading a book of poetry by Layli Long Soldier – entitled "Whereas". She is Oglala Sioux and tells the story of the Dakota 38 – 38 Dakota men who were hanged on December 26, 1862, the day after Christmas under order by President Abraham Lincoln. Yet – the irony that it happened during America's bloodiest war. But, the facts are the facts. The Dakota people had been starving. Their lands were taken from them, leaving them with fewer places to farm – hunt, or gather sufficiently to feed their families. Starving people become desperate people. To make bad matters worse they could not get credit – hence the Sioux uprising. It's a chapter in our nation's history which does not make me proud. Instead it makes me wince, revealing the futility of violence to settle matters. The wounds of our history require tending. They will never heal if we deny them. These wounds of our history requires tending – and they can be healed if and when Christ-like men and women like you and me extend the Grace of God to those outside our immediate circle!

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me! Because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind. To let the oppressed go free. To proclaim the year of the Lord's Favor. But when Jesus declared the mercy of God applied to a widow at Zarephath – and a Syrian general, His people were scandalized. Yet, He rode that scandal, their scorn – all the way to the cross at Calvary. He died there to set us free. He rose from the cross to show us a still more excellent way!

As a congregation – First Presbyterian has tended the wounds of history. You may not think so – but when you reached out to the Bethel congregation – and declared that it was scandalous to have two Presbyterian churches – side by side- one black, the other white. You took a stand. I don't know the full story – I'm sure there was resistance, and like any major change – calls to keep things like they were. But history is neither wooden nor finite. It moves – with God's help from healing to healing, from breakthrough to breakthrough. With God's help you merged two congregation into one- showing forth the beauty of the body of Christ. Continuing this mission – I believe we can seek opportunities to connect with the Shinnecock Presbyterian Church – so that together – we can heal any wounds of our local history: Let the congregations connect – making each stronger for the recognition of our past – and preparation for a future where no one is left behind or no one is hurting!

Will the wounds of our history ever be healed? Scott Lewis asks. It's a good question. Some days I am pessimistic – offended by the language of attack which can be heard wherever you turn. Some days I am pessimistic that because we seem to be repeating the mistakes of the past; we have made too little effort to understand it. But, then there are other days – such as today – when the church of Jesus Christ rises up to speak. There are days like today when the church confronts the evils we deplore with the cross of our redemption. There are days like a year ago last March when a 16 year old reclaimed her own history by reading Scripture in her own Lakota language before a congregation she had never met – but who was impressed, and grateful for her courage.

We have work to do as God's people. With God's help it is never impossible work – nor is it labor in vain. It is a work already begun by Jesus of Nazareth. Announcing the wideness of God's mercy, and the depth of His love. Practice that and we are closer to healing the wounds. To God be the glory, world without end. Amen. – Practice that and God's will is done.