

FCCS March 1, 2020
Rev. Curran Reichert

“Trauma and Grace”

Matthew 4:1-11 Temptation in the Desert

What is your experience with Lent?

In the life of the Catholic church, these forty days were originally meant to prepare would be priests for baptism and taking of their final vows as Religious men. Since that is not what we are doing in our context, pastors of churches like ours set out to create a theme that running throughout the six Sundays leading up to Easter will provide opportunities for insight and self-discovery. Each year progressive pastors scramble to find the ever illusive perfect resource for unlocking the mystery of the Lenten season.

The forty days and forty nights of Lent are designed to draw Christians into a deep contemplative space- the word itself refers to the lengthening of days- followers are invited to walk with Jesus into the wilderness and once there to do as he did, find the spiritual courage to wrestle with demons.

Lent is a time to engage the big existential questions; belief, faith, spiritual longing, and the existence of God. For many of us growing up in churches, Lent may have been more instructional than invitational, centered more on compliance and sacrifice than about questions and exploration, but in the UCC in general and certainly here at FCC, Lent is a time to go for it, to go deep and lean into the darkness of our fears and doubts with a willingness to allow for transformation.

To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight, and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings. Wendell Barry

I have chosen to spend these six weeks engaging the topic of trauma, because it seems to me the most identifiable expression of wilderness wandering in our culture today. I believe there is power in identifying what trauma is, who suffers most from it, and some of the resources available to help to manage it. Healing from trauma or at the very least coping with traumatic experience requires a great deal of spiritual fortitude and am hopeful that our journey together through Lent will strengthen our spiritual resiliency both as individuals and as a congregation.

I used to think of trauma as something that happened to a small percentage of people, usually somewhat removed from the mainstream, and the general perception of trauma was that it was fixable. A person having suffered a traumatic event would undergo treatment to heal from said event; trauma had a beginning, middle, and end.

Science and Psychology have evolved rapidly throughout your life time and mine, now we broadly understand that trauma has been part of the human condition since we evolved as a species. It is also clear to most people that going forward we are living in a world that will increasingly know more regular exposure to trauma than less of it.

With the discovery of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the early eighties we also learned that exposure to trauma can take decades to manifest symptoms and in some cases a lifetime from which to recover. Untreated trauma can lead to debilitation and sometimes death.

We are starting to understand that trauma can be passed on generationally. When our species creates problems for which there are foreseeable solutions, we systematically pass that unresolved trauma onto the next generation and will keep doing so until the trauma is resolved.

If you are a person of color, a religious minority, queer, poor, or female you deal with trauma every single day — that is a fact.

So, where do we turn to when trauma threatens to swallow us whole?

Jesus turned to prayer, he sought oneness with God, but to do so he did not go inside he went outside. He did not go into places with bright lights and street signs, he went into a place with no unnatural lightness, a place of rocks and caves, he went willingly into a dark night of the soul and that is where we are being asked to go as well.

Religion functions as a way to help people understand hardship, it reminds us that we are neither the first nor will we be the last to endure traumatic events and it promises that God is with us in the wilderness, but it does not tell us in what form or where to look.

Religion, Christianity in particular, also holds promises for transformation assuring followers of Jesus that those who find their life will lose it and those who lose their life for the sake of walking with God will find it. (Gospel of Mathew) But we as Christians do not spend as much time focusing on what it feels like to lose oneself as we do on what it feels like to be found.

Traumatic events like wildfires, and illness, terrorism and racism leave us wondering who we are. Lent is a time to stick with that question rather than to shy away from it. When the rug is pulled out from under us, when up is down and day is night- who are we, surely that is the great spiritual question of our time?

I have a hunch, that the answers we seek are in places we have previously overlooked or dismissed as less than important. I think the resources we need for finding our way through the trauma's that affect us daily, will show up these next few weeks in uniformly simple ways and that these solutions might easily be understood as the many faces of grace.

My family has in the last ten days survived a life-threatening illness, although we spend the day back in the ER with my father yesterday. While I have observed much, I am finding it difficult to articulate most of what I have seen and felt. I am learning that with trauma that there is no way to shortcut to process and often the last thing to show up are the words we need to describe what we've been through.

One thing I can say is that this last week in particular, I have noticed my eyes being drawn to what is beautiful; a purple hyacinth in full bloom or pink sunset cloud, a ribbon in my daughter's hair, or a peaceful look on our kitten's face. I am drawn to beauty like water to parched lips, even a few drops seem to restore me to myself.

Another thing is this; many of you and my parent's church community and friends promised they were keeping us in prayer. I was told that there were candles lit and vigils held- all of which touched me very deeply and got me thinking, what exactly is prayer?

It can't possibly be that there is a benevolent power out there that responds to someone's need if and only that person is mentioned in enough prayers- for that would leave us to wonder about those whose prayers are never answered.

No, I have to believe that prayer is a form of enjoining to what already is... I've been picturing it like a river, a powerful river that flows throughout time. It has an unwavering current, the direction it flows is forward, it flows from and toward life, creation, endlessness, and peace.

When we pray, we don't change current, it doesn't need us in order to flow, but we enjoin ourselves to it. The prayers for my father and for my family helped to move us forward away from fear and doubt toward whatever was next each day. They helped us to feel less alone and provided courage when our own was in short supply. Prayers offered in love are not predicated on outcome, but they help to propel us to the next best moment.

Gathering in community is the same thing. More and more I don't see us gathering around answers, we gather to be together with our questions. The hope, I think, is that if we put all of our experience and best intentions into one circle we will be changed for the better. I always those kinds of gatherings feeling restored and hopeful. I leave better than I was when I arrived and ready to face what is, not necessarily because I know more, but because I'm grounded.

A predetermined set of beliefs is not a requirement for admiring beauty, or enjoining oneself in prayer or gathering in community- it is quite possible that our predetermined beliefs might actually prevent us from being fully present to any or all of those things. So, rest assured that if you are not sure what or who you believe in on this the first Sunday in Lent, you are in good company and you may in fact be better prepared than most for the journey into the wilderness.

Amen