Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

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*“Mission In a Wounded World”* John 20:19-29

Although we all know the story of “doubting Thomas,” I wonder if you find it as startling as I do to hear it on this particular morning. We rarely remember or hear about Thomas at the start of fall. We usually hear his story on the Sunday after Easter Sunday. It is, you see, part of the Easter story—the *post*-Easter story. It is about what came of Jesus’ life and ministry, his death and most importantly, his resurrection—what came of it among his disciples.

After all that has happened, John tells us, and before the Risen Christ appears to his disciples, they are all back in the upper room—hiding. They have had news that the tomb was empty, yet here they are doing all they can to keep the world out. They are in full retreat from any human encounters.

When Christ appears to them, however, he does not admonish them. Instead, he gives them both the Holy Spirit and a renewed commission to go out into the world. Christ may have had to breach the doors they have closed and locked in fear of the rest of the world, but when he leaves them, the doors are blown wide open and those who believe are thrust out into the world by the power of the Holy Spirit.

They are thrust out after Christ has shown them his wounds—the marks on his hands and the place where the spear cut into his side. Seeing this, the disciples are ready for the world, and their ministry in it.

It is important and telling that he does not appear in perfect, pre-crucifixion wholeness. Instead, the disciples are shown a Christ whose body bears the marks of his ordeal—the marks of the world’s fear and its willingness to casually destroy. The world and its powers have tried to destroy Christ because his is a power that is beyond earthly control. Christ is the embodiment of a power that offers peace; a power that cherishes justice and encourages compassion. He is also the epitome of a servant leader who poured out his love without reservation. Christ is the power of God’s love and God’s desire to bless and create, and to bring forth life in the world.

In the passage we heard, Christ has come to stand among them and begins to speak to them once more. Indeed, he begins to outline their future, and the future of the church. With every utterance he more clearly describes the future—*their* future in the world.

First, he announces what appears to be the simple, standard form of salutation: “Peace be with you” [v.19]. However, the “peace” Christ offers them, the *“shalom,”* he pronounces over them, is a term that connotes far more than “peace” as the absence of conflict.

John’s use of this address as Christ’s first words to his disciples after his death and resurrection suggests that he also intends to include the meaning of “wholeness” that *shalom* contains within it. This wholeness, which is the gift of the “suffering servant” in Isaiah 53:5, is none other than the gift of salvation itself.

Then, Christ passes what had been his own mission onto the disciples and the church they will build. He authorizes them to continue the mission he had also received. They are being “sent” into the world by Christ just as he was “sent” into the world by God.

Finally, Christ gives them the Holy Spirit and tells them that they now have the strength and the courage to receive the hurt and trials of the world, and overcome them. Or they can retain the pain the world offers them, *un*transformed. This mission is nothing less than carrying God’s redemptive activity—God’s healing power—into the world.

However, this urgent mission can only begin once they have looked upon, without flinching or turning aside, the woundedness of the body of Christ. I especially want to remember and underscore the way in which St. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, describes followers of Jesus as “the body of Christ.”

If we are his body then Christ’s woundedness is the first and foremost aspect of faithfulness that we have been given. More importantly, his woundedness acknowledges ours, too. We are his body. We now must notice and not avert our eyes if we want to be in his presence. This is the whole point of the way in which he offers his peace and his wounded body. *We* are the body and our mutual woundedness with Christ has tremendous implications for how we live in the world, and with others.

Paul Koolman, professor of Missions Studies at Notre Dame, puts it this way:

*Woundedness modifies not only bodies but minds and spirits; not only individual persons but communities; not only humans but other living creatures; not only living beings but cosmological/cyclical aspects of our planet’s process that are non-biological; not only present realities but the past as remembered and the future as envisioned; not only contexts for personal and collective action but perspectival horizons in which to consider the reality and concomitant human responsibility.* (*The Urgent Demands of the Present: Missiological Discernment in a Wounded World.* Mission Studies, issue no. 39|p. 139-162)’

From now on, the disciples’ mission is to take seriously the world’s woundedness. They are to remember Christ’s wounds and hold them as precious because they reflect the wounds and woundedness of us all.

But what does this mean for us?

We know that a good part of the history of the church has included contemplation on the wounds of Christ. Indeed, there have been hundreds of missionaries and pilgrims who have, over the years, been inspired by the wounds of Christ. Many have been inspired to go into the mission field because of their devotions on his wounds—the way in which he received his wounds from misguided, often evil human beings who did not know or acknowledge him as Savior and Messiah.

While we may continue to admire the selflessness of such people and their faithfulness, we should also be glad that in recent years reflection invoking the wounds of Christ has shifted. Now, instead of contemplating the wounds on the body Christ lived in and moved about in the world, contemplation of mission now understands that Christ’s body in the world is most authentically experienced and accessed in the woundedness of God’s beloved people.

*We are the body of Christ*. We are—all of us. Thus, his wounds may be found in the lives of all human creatures. This changes things in very important ways.

From now on, mission is no longer a top-down kind of relationship. If we too are the wounded, then from now on, as part of the body of Christ *together*, missioners have the opportunity to engage with other people from a position of our shared vulnerability. We can enter into relationships with other people as equals and partners in healing the body *together*. We can enter into relationships where both communities have something to offer each other—a mutuality of support and strength, of education and wisdom. This is how respect becomes mutual and deep. This is how authentic sharing may begin.

One theologian, Miriam Leidinger, has spoken about modern mission in a way that takes seriously the word “vulnerability.” She points out that there are two parts to the word. The first, *vulnera*, or woundedness, and the second part, “ability.” Leidinger suggests that we can understand and embrace this word as a description of our capacities for faith-based responses. However, ours are “capacities that remain *despite being wounded”*. She also suggests that this lessens “the risk that we imagine ourselves to be messianic on our own.”

This new perspective on the body of Christ and its wounds can, I believe, free us from any hesitation we may have about reaching out into the world because it helps us see how our efforts are also going to result in a building-up of our own spirits. It also affirms our humanness—we may have our own wounds, but this is not something to hide from or be ashamed of. Rather, it can be the source of our humility. If nothing else, it gives us a new sense of ourselves—a new sense of honesty—which we may offer, and on which we may build new friendships and partnerships with others.

By following Christ into mission, we are following him to places, and to be with people where we, too, may receive that which is life-giving and blessed. We, too, may receive as much as we share. Most of all, mission will allow us to meet Christ in ways and places—in people—and in ways we have never seen or experienced before.

As for the way in which we usually hear and reflect on this story—as the story of Thomas and his doubt—one of the things we are meant to see is that Christ has noticed that Thomas is missing from the room that first Sunday. And so, he returns so that Thomas will not be left out. Christ returns so that Thomas, too, will see his wounds and will re-commit himself to healing the wounds he finds in himself and others. Christ returned so that Thomas, too, would come to believe, and in believing come to a renewed commitment to the mission God had called him to.

Our good news is that Christ is looking for us, too. The good news is that we too have a part to play in his mission in the world. And I pray that, knowing this, we too are able to exclaim with great joy, like Thomas, “My Lord, and my God!” I pray we will receive, and *be*, the body of Christ and bring and *be* healed.

May this be so. Amen.