

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Sermon preached by the Rev. Susan Pinkerton, Rector, St. John's Episcopal Church
West Hartford, CT

Becoming a Wounded Healer

Rebekah is a remarkable woman. Much like Abraham who left all behind, Rebekah demonstrates a rare courage grounded in her faith in God's promise. This deep faith allows Rebekah to move entirely out of her comfort zone and venture into unknown territory, leaving all things safe and familiar behind. Trusting in what the servant has told her about God and his master she agrees to become Isaac's wife. Rebekah is a powerful example of what it means to be faithful in the face of the unknown. And, isn't this when we need God the most; at the junctures of our lives when the path forward becomes rocky, a bit blurred and maybe full of unintended detours. How does God call us to show our faith when we have no earthly idea of the outcome? Are we being faithful when we make the decision to follow God's call, much like Abraham and Rebekah, or are we simply being foolish and naive in the eyes of the world?

In today's message from Matthew's gospel Jesus is addressing those gathered around him after having commissioned his inner circle of twelve for God's mission in the world. He is calling out not a few but an entire generation.¹ He is admonishing those in positions of privilege and power for their failure to hear the real message of God's Kingdom, brought first by Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist and then by Jesus himself. For all their wealth, intelligence and status, the ruling class has failed to understand Jesus' Good News of love and justice. They failed to respond in appropriate ways to those who are struggling and suffering in their very midst. To make his point Jesus recites part of a children's rhyme, "We played the flute for you and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn." In other words, Jesus says, "John and I shared the good news of God's saving grace and yet you did not rejoice. We also shared the plight of the poor and most vulnerable and yet, you felt nothing and did nothing." Is it any different today for our generation? How often are we distracted or preoccupied by things that really don't matter. How often do we miss the very things that are nearest and dearest to God's heart?

Jesus says those who understand his message are like "infants." In other words, it is often not those that our society honors, the wise, powerful and rich that understand God's message best. It is those who live on the margins; the ones who are powerless or disenfranchised. They are the very ones we often overlook or discount.

Henri Nouwen was a well-known Roman Catholic priest who authored of a long list of spiritual books and taught at Yale, Harvard and Notre Dame. However, he spent his most fulfilling

¹ William Goettler, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 3*, ed. Wm. Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster Knoxville Press, 2011), 212.

work serving as a chaplain at Daybreak. It is one of many L'Arche communities around the world that is dedicated to helping the mentally impaired live their lives with dignity and love. It is a place where both the mentally impaired and their assistants come from all over the world to live together following the Gospel. Nouwen lived in this ecumenical community in Canada for several years before his death. Nouwen said living and helping the disabled in a place like Daybreak reveals our brokenness to ourselves and one another. And it is in our brokenness where God meets us and welcomes us wherever that may be without exception.

Nouwen said, "Jesus didn't say, 'Blessed are those who care for the poor.' He said, 'Blessed are we where we are poor, where we are broken.' It is there that God loves us deeply and pulls us into deeper communion with himself. I find it very important," Nouwen added, "to stress that we are wounded healers; we don't have to run away from our vulnerability as if we don't hurt."²

"L'Arche exists not to help the mentally handicapped get 'normal,' but to help them share their spiritual gifts with the world... In their poverty, the mentally handicapped reveal God to us and hold us close to the gospel."³

I think this is exactly what Jesus is getting at in today's reading from Matthew. When we become aware of and respond to those who are weary and carrying heavy burdens in this world we begin to see the world in a whole new way. We see the world in the same way God sees it. We become aware our own wounds and interconnectedness. And, we begin to see our need for each other and for God. This is the beginning of true humility. It is in our brokenness, the cracks in our souls, where the light of Christ shines through revealing God's grace working in and through us with acts of love and service. We begin, like Rebekah, by trusting in God's promise and stepping out of our comfort zones. This is where we find God's blessing.

This coming Tuesday I am joining several other faith leaders from the Greater Hartford area who are coming together at Shiloh Baptist Church to address an urgent need right here in our community. A well-known slumlord, who owns numerous government subsidized rental properties here in Connecticut, as well as in a few other states, has refused consistently to remedy a host of housing violations in his units on the north side of Hartford. His tenants are the working poor; those on the margins and without power or status. The conditions in which they live are deplorable and hard to imagine. The residents are plagued with infestation of vermin; windows are nailed shut; property managers who are often absent and non-responsive to complaints. These living conditions are unacceptable. They are degrading and reveal a total disregard for the welfare and basic human dignity of his residents. Yet, the landlord continues to receive rent monies from the government despite these blatant and ongoing housing violations. We will be a voice for those who have had no voice at this public meeting, bringing to light the urgent need to respond to the needs of the residents who are weary of their suffering because of blatant neglect and callous indifference.

I don't know what will be the outcome of our meeting on Tuesday but I have faith that the Holy Spirit will be present, giving rest to those who are weary and whose burdens are heavy.

² Arthur Boers, *What Henri Nouwen Found at Daybreak*, Oct. 3 1994, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1994/october3/4tb028.html?start=1> last accessed on 7/7/2017.

³ Boers.

God's promise is true for all of us who are worn down by the struggles and challenges of living in a broken world. To take on the gospel centered life Jesus offers us is no easy feat. But, it holds the assurance of living a life that is worth living; a life that is true; and, a life that holds meaning and purpose. As we take on the yoke of Jesus and find much needed rest for our weary souls, we too become the wounded healer, like Jesus, reaching out in love and compassion to be of service to others. In time "our wounds become the source of healing for others."⁴ This is God's promise to us today. It begins by stepping out in faith, knowing God is with us every step of the way, just as he was with Abraham and Rebekah.

Amen.

⁴ Henri Nouwen, Meditation for July 8, from *The Wounded Healer*.

