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First Presbyterian Church
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Luke 13:10-17

"Practicing Our Faith: Encountering Others"

I said last week that my original plan for the summer was to do a sermon series on spiritual practices based on Dorothy Bass's book *Practicing Our Faith* and Barbara Brown Taylor's book *An Altar in the World*.

I also said that from time to time we all need some tools in our toolkit, we all need practices, to help us with our faith. I certainly needed tools in my recovery. But we all need tools: We live in a challenging time. News comes at us constantly, alerts pop up on our phones, and crises happen halfway around the world. How can our faith help us?

Today's practice was very helpful to me in my recovery. And for lack of a better word, I'll call it the practice of being in community.

Friends, my biggest leaps and bounds in my recovery came not after a doctor's appointment, but in community; especially after I spent time with others. The first was early in the summer after a wedding shower for my son Henry and daughter-in-law Kassady when I had the opportunity to visit with family and dear dear friends. That weekend was especially important for my mental health because I was reminded that I was someone other than a person who had had a stroke. I had spent so much time with doctors and therapists at that point that I'd sort of lost touch with who I was. It sounds a little odd, but I think of all these people in the Bible who do not have a name — like the bent-over woman, and all we ever know about them is their ailment. Well, you spend enough time with medical professionals, and you start to know how that feels. And it feels awful. So that wedding shower weekend was important.

The other important moment in my recovery was the weekend I spent with my sister and Mom celebrating my mom's 94th birthday. That was a very special weekend. My sister flew to Fort Wayne, and together we drove over to Akron and

celebrated my mom. Along with my brother and sister-in-law, we went out to eat at one her favorite restaurants, and she ate her entire dinner and drank a big glass of wine, and the next day which was her actual birthday my mom got to go outside and sit on her terrace, (which she loved; it was a beautiful day), and we had a champagne toast to celebrate. And the more I was with my Mom and sister, and spent time with dear dear friends, the more I was drawn out of myself, and my own needs and preoccupations, and that was a good thing. That was healing.

You know, my recovery reminded me that healing happens in community — that we were never meant to do life alone. And it turns out, science agrees with that.

What makes us healthy and happy as we go through life?

There's a TED Talk I love called "What Makes a Good Life?" by Robert Waldinger who is director of The Harvard Study of Adult Development. It may be the longest study of adult life that's ever been done.

For 75 years, they tracked 724 men, asking about work, home life, health and relationships.

Studies like this are exceedingly rare. But this one persisted for 75 years.

About 60 of our original 724 men are still alive, still participating in the study, most of them in their 90s (they started the study at 19 years old). And they are now beginning to study the more than 2,000 children of these men.

Since 1938, they've tracked the lives of two groups of men: sophomores at Harvard and boys from Boston's poorest neighborhoods

When they entered the study, all of these teenagers were interviewed, given medical exams , and their parents were interviewed.

And then these teenagers grew up into adults who entered all walks of life.

They became factory workers and lawyers and bricklayers and doctors, one President of the United States. Some developed alcoholism. A few developed schizophrenia. Some climbed the social ladder from the bottom all the way to the very top, and some made that journey in the opposite direction.

To get the clearest picture of these lives, researchers don't just send them questionnaires. They interview them in their living rooms and videotape them talking with their wives about their deepest concerns.

So what have they learned? the lessons aren't about wealth or fame or working harder and harder. The clearest message that they get from this 75-year study is this: Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period.

Why is this so hard to get and so easy to ignore? Well, we're human.

What we'd really like is a quick fix, but being in community is messy and complicated and the hard work of tending to family and friends, is not sexy or glamorous. It's easier to take a statin for my cholesterol than work on my marriage or friendships. But the researchers found the cholesterol levels of the men when they were in their 50s, didn't tell them whether they would live a long and happy life. What mattered were their relationships; their community.

So what about you? Let's say you're 25, or you're 40, or you're 60.

What might leaning in to relationships even look like?

Well, the possibilities are endless. It might be something as simple as replacing screen time with people time or livening up a stale relationship by doing something new together, long walks or date nights, or reaching out to that family member who you haven't spoken to in years, because those all-too-common family feuds take a terrible toll on the people who hold the grudges.

Friends, every time we truly encounter another human being, the way Jesus did in the story— with compassion first — it's not only good for our health; it's faithful, too. the kingdom of God breaks in, right here, right now.

So we heard the bent over woman's story last week.

But let's play the opposite side of the field today and say that the religious authorities were real buffoons. I mean, c'mon! They take Jesus to task for healing the woman but they're willing to give their ox or donkey water? What the religious leader misses in his argument with Jesus is the heart of the Sabbath .. what he misses is compassion. Especially the kind of compassion that trumps legalism or the kind of compassion that doesn't cling to our orthodoxy for

orthodoxy's sake but instead sees the broken body the broken soul and the broken spirit before it sees the broken commandment.

This story, like so many gospel stories, illustrates a basic truth about God's kingdom, which is that the kingdom doesn't care about our timing, or our sense of etiquette, or our obsessions with propriety and decorum. No The kingdom cares about love. And it cares about love NOW!

Friends I truly believe that the church can be a healing force in the world. Just like Jesus is in this story. In a culture that rewards outrage and division we can be a community that practices encountering others or what Barbara Brown Taylor calls "the practice of encountering others" which prioritizes compassion over correctness and love over labels. we can be a place where people who feel bent over by life are seen, named and lifted up; and that is countercultural; that is Christ like and that's the kind of church our world desperately needs.

Like The practice of being in community, the practice of "encountering others." draws us out of ourselves, our preoccupation with our own needs, and these days, it's literally life-saving. In a world so often divided by identity and difference, learning to encounter another human being as a child of God — even someone very different from us — like Jesus encounters the bent over woman-- is essential to healing, both for them and for us. Encountering others is hard work, because it challenges our assumptions, our self-interest, and our comfort. The religious leader had his assumptions, self-interest and comfort challenged. Yet encountering others is one of the most powerful ways a community heals — the very act of seeing, listening, and caring for another person helps restore us as much as it restores them.

In a world where differences and identity have become more important than any of us could have guessed even 15 years ago, we know all about "Us" vs. "Them" (sadly). This is why the practice of encountering others is some of the hardest spiritual work. Have you noticed that nothing strengthens a community like a common enemy? Bosnian born theologian Miroslav Volf says, "It may not be too

much to claim that the future of our world will depend on how we deal with identity and difference."

This week, your your homework is to see the image of God in a person whose image is different than yours.

The Old Testament Commands us to love our neighbor only 1 time, but 36 times it commands us to love the stranger, And why should we love the stranger? Because God does.

This is what Jesus is showing us in this story — that wholeness happens when we're seen and known, when we encounter one another with compassion. That the broken body is more important than the broken commandment. The woman isn't just healed physically; she's restored to community. She's no longer bent out of shape, shut out, or unseen. She's back in relationship. That's the real miracle.

That was instrumental to me in my recovery. community. The ruth is, I couldn't have recovered without you, and other people who are in my community — friends, family — In fact, I don' know how people heal alone. Your cards, letters, and meals were not only helpful, but I felt your prayers uplift me. I loved reading your notes and hearing about your summer and what you were doing. And your stories brought me joy when my summer was hard. when you

said you were praying, I took you at your word! And I was grateful because I needed them.

And it got me thinking — how powerful it is simply to be seen, cared for, and remembered by others. Because that's what healing community looks like. So here's my challenge to us this week: practice encountering others. Don't just rush past people. Look up. Meet someone's eyes. Ask how they are — and mean it. Be curious instead of defensive. Be kind instead of certain.

Let us be a Church, where people are seen, cherished, called, invited, unbound, and healed? Many people are still crippled because they haven't experienced the church as a place of healing. About halfway through the summer, as I came back from the mailbox, cards in hand, I said to Julia, "What exactly do people do if they

don't have a faith community at times like this?" I know people like to take their pot shots at the Church these days, and sometimes those shots have been earned, but seriously, what do people do?

Through your cards and prayers, your meals and stories, your patience and love. You reminded me what it means to encounter others with compassion — not as projects to fix, but as people to love.

And if that can happen for me, it can happen for anyone.

That's the beauty of the Church when we live out our calling.

We become a community that heals, that lifts, that sees, that restores. A community that embodies the compassion of Christ in a world that so desperately needs it.

So friends, on this stewardship pledge day, . Don't give money to the church just because the Church needs your money. Give because there's power in community; power in this community — and the world needs more of it, not less.

So, Keep choosing love over rules, mercy over pride, and presence over perfection.

Because when we do, the world begins to straighten up again — and we all stand a little taller in the grace of God.

Amen.

Sources:

Barbara Brown Taylor, "An Altar in the World"

Youtube.com "What Makes a Good Life? Lessons on the Longest Study on Happiness",

Robert

Waldinger

Debie Thomas, "She Stood Up Straight", August 18, 2019