

"Healing in the Soil"  
Rev. Ben Heimach-Snipes  
Morgan Park Presbyterian Church

Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:14-21

Last Saturday morning a group of six students from the South and West sides of Chicago entered the home of Emma Gonzalez - an outspoken survivor of the high school shooting in Parkland Florida. They were joined by other survivors of the mass shooting who have been in the news lately. They gathered around some pizza at the edge of an indoor pool connected to the family's large house in this tropical gated community.

After getting to know each other a bit, Vashon shared his story of the night his mother was shot - caught in the crossfire during a robbery. He noticed "a couple of eyes open wide" as he shared his experience of regular trauma in his Chicago community.

The Parkland students talked about what happened to them, as well, and Trinity - from Chicago, noticed that one difference was in how much support they've received for the trauma they've endured.

"I didn't feel resentful," she said, but she wondered what would it take to get more support for Chicago's young victims of violence.

A critical moment came when one of the Parkland students apologized for the privilege they took for granted.

"Any barriers that could have divided us," Johnson recalled, "completely disintegrated at that moment. I was in tears." As were many others.

The stark differences in class, race and privilege that divided these groups of young people were bridged by an apology for the inequality they had inherited - an awareness of the privilege that had given them a national voice and a supportive community. These children apologized for the privilege that they were still being socialized into. They apologized for this original sin that they inherited from their families and from their nation. They apologized for the privilege they took for granted that provided them support in their grief, agency in their desire for change and hope for an end to the violence.

The heartfelt apology for this power beyond their control melted away any barriers that divided these anti-violence advocates. And with this act of repentance, the newly formed community could share a moment of healing - not only for their moments of trauma, but also for a lifetime of inequality.

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The Israelites also experienced healing when they engaged in an act of repentance. In our story from the book of Numbers today, the Hebrew community - still wondering in the wilderness - grew impatient with their miraculous journey out of slavery. They protested their long journey, they protested their food - still provided miraculously by God every morning, and even seemed to protest their freedom - preferring the security of slavery over the adversity of freedom. This anxiety to return to the familiar infects the entire community.

And then come the snakes. The judgment of God is made manifest in this newly nomadic community in the form of venomous snakes that begin to kill the blasphemous Israelites. And this is how the people respond:

“The people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people.”

After experiencing the trauma of the deadly snakes, the people respond - not out of anger or fear - but out of remorse. They acknowledge their own sin in the midst of the long journey toward liberation and turn away - they repent - and return their focus to being in right relationship with God.

And it is the people’s repentance that invokes a new season of healing in their community. Moses prays to God for the people because of their repentance. God creates a healing serpent staff with Moses because of their repentance. They experience healing together because of their repentance.

But how do we apply this in our lives? Does God wait for us to repent to lift up Jesus as Moses does with the healing serpent? Jesus states in our Gospel text today, “just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”

How do we access the healing love that Jesus comes to earth to share?

In a similar cross cultural experience to the pool party in Florida attended by very different victims of gun violence, this passage from the book of John is the result of a conversation between Jesus and his disciples and a privileged Pharisee named Nicodemus. Nicodemus came by night to share with Jesus that his community knew Jesus came from God. He came in the night to be a student of Jesus while maintaining his power and authority as a Jewish leader in Jerusalem.

Even though Nicodemus claims that the Pharisees - his community - knew that Jesus was from God, Nicodemus knew that the Pharisees and the entire Jewish kingdom under Roman

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occupation was afraid of the power they could lose if a divine leader like Jesus was allowed to grow his ministry. This reaction to cling to power - to fear the change that comes with God's love and grace - is exactly what persuades Nicodemus to come to Jesus in the darkness of night.

It is in this context that Jesus teaches Nicodemus that those who cling to the shadows provide their own judgment in the presence of the light of Christ. He encourages Nicodemus to live with integrity to what is true, that "those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

As people preparing for Easter, knowing that we must first encounter the execution of Christ on Good Friday, we have experience with the shadows of humanity - the sins we have inherited and those we commit ourselves. We continue to live sinful lives and trigger pain on one another. We can be easily convinced to avoid the challenging path of repentance and work to keep our sins hidden from our community and ourselves.

But Jesus calls us into the light. Jesus invites us to reveal our sins and have faith that God's grace can handle the brokenness that we carry with us. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

God actively provides grace because of God's love for all creation. In response, we as the church actively celebrate God's grace as the source of our salvation. We respond to God's grace by embodying the love, justice and grace of God in our world. And when we really work at this embodiment, we realize that we need God's grace in order to begin to live this out.

God calls us to repentance in this time of Lent, not to shame us for our iniquity or prove our unworthiness before God, but to provide a space for healing. Like the Israelites apologizing to Moses and the students of Parkland Florida apologizing to our own Chicago students, we too can develop an awareness of the shadows that disconnect us from God and from our neighbors and seek repentance.

When we repent, we become open to God's grace that has been there all along. We step toward the light of Jesus and become more comfortable and more aware of ourselves. When we repent, we seek to change - to turn away from seductive sins that keep us from embodying the love of God.

I am inspired by the power of those few words spoken by a Parkland student - "I am sorry." I am sorry for the privilege I don't understand. I am sorry for the iniquities that separate our experiences of trauma. I believe these words are powerful. I believe these words inspire change -

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inspire hope - inspire healing. And I believe these words required a great deal of energy, maturity and self awareness to be spoken.

These children had to confront the sin of oppression and violence that was weaved into this country's origin in order to step into the light, find their integrity, and discover how to love each other across difference. It is in this most challenging act of self definition that this unexpected community of students found healing that allowed them to continue to seek love and justice in the world together.

Today Jesus calls us into the light. Jesus calls us to repentance so that we might encounter the healing power of grace. Jesus calls us out of the shadows of fear and judgment that hinder our commitment to God's love. Jesus calls us into radical freedom - freedom from sin - freedom that empowers us to live out God's kingdom.

As we continue along our journey toward Easter - toward our Risen Lord that breaks the bonds of sin and death - let us journey more fully into the light of Christ. Let us reveal the shadows that sin has cast upon us and experience ourselves as God created us. God created us and called us good.

Amen.

As we respond to the call of Jesus this day, I invite you to journey a little further toward God's grace by praying for healing. You can take out the colored paper in your bulletin, find a pen or pencil, and write down a prayer for the healing and transformation that you need today.

Ask Jesus to heal and transform us as individuals and as a congregation. What healing do we yearn for? What transformation do we hope for? How do we feel God calling us to change?

When you have written your prayer of healing and transformation, you can bring it forward and add it to our compost bin. In our compost bin, we are taking our vulnerabilities and hopes, our brokenness and our love, and allowing them to stand together before God so that we might be transformed. For truly nourishing soil, we pray for healing this day.