

Sermon Title: Soul Repair

Scripture: 1 John 3:16-24

Theme: God is greater than our moral injury and moral conscience

“Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him, whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.” (18-20)

One of the many memes of resurrection in our Scriptures comes from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 3:18-22

[Jesus] was put to death (*thanatoó*) in the flesh (*sarx*) but made alive (*zōopoieó*) in the spirit, in which he preached (*kérussó*) to the in-prison spirits ... [he proclaimed] a baptism which is not the removal of dirt/filth from the body, but a **pledge (*eperótéma*, appeal) of a clear conscience (*suneidésis*, co-perception of conscience) toward God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.**”

This meme precedes our understanding of the Scripture (1 John 3:18-20) for today, that God is greater than any heart that would condemn, any conscience that would keep us imprisoned in our guilt or shame. You may remember a few decades ago the quote from Corrie Ten Bloom, “there is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still!” What our Scripture tells us today is that God is always greater than any past or broken narrative that might be controlling us in ways that it should not. Literally, in the Greek, it warns us NOT to degrade ourselves, NOT to “know [ourselves or others] down.’ The Greek word is: *kataginóskó*. You have probably heard the phrase: ‘misery loves company,’ spoken generally about some people. This is the spirit of knowing-down, that rather than using our minds and words to lift others up, instead we know-down ourselves and others, by spreading blame or shame around, a blame or shame that we may feel, and want others to share with us.

This morning, I would like to contrast ‘knowing-down’ with the meaning of another Greek verb. This verb expresses the opposite of “knowing down,” or shaming others. I would like to share the Greek words from 1 Peter 4:8, ‘ἀγάπην ἔκτενῆ. I translate these words as “keeping love constant.” In other words, keeping our love earnest and eager before all things. According to First Peter, such a deep and lasting love for each other covers a multitude of sins. J.B. Phillips translated these words as “having a real deep love for each other.”

Sharing the struggles of our fellow believers carries with it a sense of helping each

other break through slavery (bondage) to sin (Rms. 6:6) expressed in the ‘guilt of our sin’ (Ps. 32:5) through a shared forgiveness. When we engage our inter-dependence, one with the other, we are less likely to listen to our ‘self-condemning heart,’ and more likely to listen to our common and loving heart. The Green word that we actually translate with the meaning “conscience” is *suneidésis* which carries the sense of ‘knowing together.’ So, for example, by closely listening to the stories of those who struggle with us in community, we are given an opportunity to repair some of the damage of moral injury and de-couple the strong connection between guilt and sin through the practice of symbolic forgiveness.<sup>1</sup> If you are not familiar with the language developed from moral injury research, the term “symbolic forgiveness” comes from that rich language. Let me give you some background on these studies.

Current statistics show us that veteran suicides average 1 every 80 minutes or about 18 per day. In 2018, the average was 18.4 and in 2021 it was 17.5. This is compared to an average of about 127 per day among all adults. In Kansas, there is also a high rate of suicide among farmers (xx.x Crisis in the Heartland). These are more than any of us can fathom or understand why. Those therapists who work with our returning soldiers describe a condition they refer to as “moral injury.” It is a condition that is being studied more fully each year to understand how to help reduce the number of suicides. It partly has to do with a new type of training soldiers receive called “reflexive fire training” designed to improve our combat-readiness, but with a downside of “bypassing the soldier’s moral decision-making process.” My seminary, Brite Divinity School, several years ago opened a Soul Repair Center for those recovering from moral injury after war. The original director of the center was Rita Nakashima Brock, whose book entitled *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury After War*, initiated a public conversation on the topic and secured funding for the Center whose mission is to equip religious leaders and professional caregivers to respond to those affected by moral injury, and to develop caring practices among congregations. Dr. Nancy J. Ramsay is the current director of the Sour Repair Center at Brite Divinity School (TCU) in Fort Worth, TX. She has carried on and extended the public conversation with her own book, *Military Moral Injury and Spiritual Care*.

The design of the Soul Repair Center is to create a “space for grace,” where people of faith, veteran and civilian alike, can join together the sometimes long journey of returning home from war, and today also, those recovering from other situations of

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<sup>1</sup> Litz, *Adaptive Disclosure*, 137. One symbolically defeats a perpetrator with support for other victims; One symbolically forgives a perpetrator when showing mercy to other perpetrators.

moral injury, such as schools, synagogues, churches, streets and other public areas. It is not a place for cheap grace, it is NOT a place that offers forgiveness too quickly, but neither is it a place, for instance, where our soldiers are asked to shoulder the burden of war alone. The moral injury of veterans that is hardest to overcome, for many, is that they survived and returned when their battle buddies did not. For some, it is the memory of killing non-combatants in the course of difficult missions, including military drone operators. But, whatever the moral injury, it can be as serious as physical injury, or even greater in some cases.

Borrowing the language of Shelly Rambo from her book *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma*, we will not find that peace that marks the beginning of all peace until we can recognize our own suffering in the suffering of others, until we can make a ‘trans-national’ witness that crosses wounds (scars) rather than erasing them. In the scars of the Risen Christ lie the healing ministries of Jesus in a new register (what jazz artists call a zenith register). In resurrection, we do not carry the memories of our crosses alone. We are invited to leave the crooked room of distortion and deception for the public room of faith. Sharing the suffering of others, in solidarity, lifts our hidden wounds to the surface so that they can be healed, linking our own wounds to those of Christ, our own crosses to those of Jesus. The scars of the Risen Christ represent all the wounds of the past, in body, mind and soul, hidden and visible, lifted-up to the healing touch of God. In resurrection, we are drawn into a new Spirit, a new Paraclete, that shares a collective memory and embodies a collective witness. Ours is no longer a lone and solitary witness, a voice crying in the wilderness without being heard. Ours is the melody of a thousand voices in concert. My suffering is not better or worse than your suffering, my wounds are not better or worse than yours. Crucifixion wounds are God’s wounds, our suffering is God’s suffering, our tears are God’s tears. The Body of Christ, the Church, is a body that bears the marks of suffering across time, past present and future, but is also a body that receives the healing love of God for all the wounded souls in every time and place, intersected in solidarity with each other through the joy of the Risen Lord.

There are several ways that the Bible speaks of a “conscience,” such as in Isaiah 30:21 where the prophet speaks of the “word behind you,” writing: “when you turn to the right or turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you saying: ‘this is the way, walk in it.’” Job 27:6 refers to Job’s heart as this conscience: “my heart does not reproach me for any of my days.” Moral character is the theme of 1 Chronicles 29:17: “I know my God that you search the heart and take pleasure in uprightness, in the uprightness of heart, I have freely offered all these things and now I have seen your people who are present here offering freely and joyously to

you.”

The Bible mentions at least three types of conscience: good conscience, weak (indecisive) conscience (1 Cor. 8:7 NRSV), and pain-ridden conscience (Heb. 10:22 NRSV). In his Letter to the Corinthians, Paul uses the Greek word “suneidesis,” (8:7,10) with the adjective “weak” to imply an “unsettled conscience (Scholar’s Version).” Perhaps we might want to reserve ‘moral injury’ to refer to pain-ridden conscience, but there are aspects of it that also belong to an “unsettled conscience.”

In our current culture, being double-hearted is defined as having a false heart that is deceitful and treacherous, but I think it might also imply an unsettled heart which is conflicted about its values as well as a guilty heart in misery about its values. This suggests that moral awareness is established in a community rather than individually, and it also implies that moral healing occurs in community. The Hebrew word for heart לֵבָב lebab implies a “folded” organ which can be “graced” or “stultified,” so we seek to find our way out of a frozen heart into an active heart unfrozen by the love expressed in community. We might imagine our hearts folded into grace, whether we are surrounded by a band of brothers or by a community of faith. Grace is not so much about thinking in human universals or escaping the pain by rising above it, but it is more about embracing the forgiveness and reconciliation beyond the pain.

Lanny Hunter describes in his book from 2004, *My Soul to Keep: A Journey in Faith*, part of the experience of Vietnam: “the violence of the war, at one point, had taken a life of its own that reached out to encompass friend and foe alike, perhaps that is what happens when we reach down into our darkest recesses and turn the violence loose, perhaps even nurturing it in some sense. Continuing down this path leads us into an ever-widening domain....” (page 115) “War, sooner or later, imposes injustice on the innocent and inflicts terror on the helpless. Using up my reserves of energy and compassion, I lost something of myself.”

Our Scripture reminds us that, in a strict sense, we cannot be commanded to love; it is something we must choose to do. The author of 1 John repeats the word love more than twenty-five times in fifteen verses. This love is not sentimental; it is hard work. Love unites us to God and to one another; it gives us confidence to face the worst of judgments. The early church Father known as Jerome, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century of the Common Era, tells us a story about John the apostle when he became older:

“When the venerable John could no longer walk to the meetings of the Church but was borne thither by his disciples, he always uttered the same address to the Church; he reminded them of that one commandment which he had received from Christ Himself, as comprising all the rest, and forming the distinction of the new covenant, "My little children, love one another." When the brethren present, wearied of hearing the same thing so often, asked why he always repeated the same thing, he replied, "Because it is the commandment of the Lord, and if this one thing be attained, it is enough.”