

Message for September 17, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church  
“I’ve Been Meaning to Ask...Where Does it Hurt?” Rev. Trish Eckert

As we move more deeply into this series, we realize how tender we are – when asked, “where does it hurt,” we are invited to pay attention to how we are genuinely doing – what is resting behind our eyes, unacknowledged, what memories of pain and trauma are we carrying in our bodies, in our hearts, in our minds? What pain have we inflicted on others, either out of ignorance or some rationale of self-defense or vengeance?

We are humans – we hurt and we are hurting. Thus, the saying: “*Hurt people, hurt people.*” Pain is a daily reality and yet we often ignore it or bury it. Many of us feel guilt or shame when we acknowledge our pain – we live in a society that is all about individuality, strength, fortitude, pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. But what happens if your bootstraps have worn out or broken, or for that matter, that you didn’t have bootstraps to begin with!

Today’s Bible Wisdom teachings touch on painful situations that are often ignored, or rarely given voice – they are considered private or unspeakable – taboo to speak about aloud. How many of us are hurting in silence, hiding our pain because we believe it to be shameful? Maybe we have been taught that certain afflictions are not for polite company, and we have learned the painful, practiced art of smiling through platitudes. Maybe our pain has been invalidated or ignored so many times that we begin to believe there truly is something disgraceful about our feelings or experiences. Maybe it feels easier to bury our emotions for fear of how they will be perceived.

In the book of Samuel, Hannah has been belittled, patronized, and provoked for her infertility—a bodily condition over which she has no control. Some of us, like Hannah, may be all too familiar with the particular grief of infertility. Others of us carry the secret sufferings of child loss, postpartum depression, sickness, job loss, economic insecurity, or addiction. What would we say if someone stopped to ask us, “Where does it hurt?” and acknowledged the validity of our answers? Would we, like Hannah, be able to share our pain with a humble and dignified honesty that trusts that there is no “right” or “proper” way to feel? Would such honesty with our own hurts and disappointments allow us to be more present to others’ afflictions, as well?

Hannah finds some peace after she explains her feelings in her own words, and she is (finally) respectfully acknowledged by Eli. Many of us can relate to the power of validation. Even as Eli himself is not able to provide an immediate solution for Hannah, he is able to accept her hurting and pray for her. Eli does not have to solve anything to be present. If we are ever to be people who bring peace and healing to this hurting world, we must be willing to pause and *bear witness* to pain—to our own and others'. Like Hannah, with dignity and honesty we can embrace our stories without shame, trusting that God is present and ever listening. In turn, instead of avoiding or delegitimizing, we can perceive and accept the pain of others, and like the God we follow, stand alongside those who suffer.

I was reading some background from the contributors of this worship series, and this woman's reflections brought to mind for me our Divine Intervention ministry here at Tippe, as well as the ministries we engage in across Greater Milwaukee. Rev. Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum, who pastors a community church in Atlanta, writes, "In the days before the pandemic, my church—a vibrant community of people with and without housing—used to gather in an old basement. Some days, especially the rainy ones, we would crowd too many people in our tiny space. On such busy days of ministry, my church had a smell to it: the combined scent of damp socks and worn-out sneakers, drying jackets and sweat-stained tee-shirts, bathrooms used as showers, coffee percolating, and the remnants of cigarettes just smoked. Every crowd has a smell to it—the pungent, sweet smell of human life itself. Death has its own smells, too. Sometimes I think we would like to sanitize or avoid them both, because what we can perceive with our senses can also remind us of where life can hurt. We avoid the man who smells of his own urine, avert our eyes from the dirtied hand reaching out for change, and try not to see ourselves in the woman whose only possessions are piled in a damp cart."

Certainly, in our well-loved and well-used building, in the middle of winter as we shift between Arts and Science Literacy Camp and Divine Intervention, or in the spring, as the gardens get underway and the kids from camp are coming and going, we have our own combined scent – of people, of the elements outside, of the weather and our HVAC system, the floors, the common spaces – and we strive to keep our spaces clean and organized, we're especially focused these days on disinfecting areas and addressing the best approaches to staying healthy. Certainly, these are important practices, but as Pastor Brittany notes, this can also be a

response to avoid difficult realities and the truth of pain and injustice. What is at the heart of our ministries and in being present to others is often rooted in the reality that life can be stinky. The pain and uncertainty of what people are experiencing, many lacking access to consistent bathing and laundry, only points to the injustice and inequality that is woven into the very systems that many of us benefit from.

In the passage from the Gospel of Mark, we find Jesus in the midst of human life—and all its hurting. He is in the press of the crowd with sweaty human bodies and the scent of a woman's blood. Jesus stops and listens to this long-hurting woman—as if pain were not so shameful but something we all experience. Jesus then enters a stagnant, grief-filled room, no doubt smelling of sickness and death. He reaches out and touches the body of a girl already thought lost. These relational and embodied healings humanize those whose hurting has been pushed aside, calling our attention to the broken systems that can perpetuate and dehumanize pain. Jesus' healing disrupts the injustice of a woman who has been rejected and labeled impure for her condition. With the girl, Jesus disrupts death itself. How might we allow Jesus to disrupt us—enabling us to acknowledge others' pain so that we may seek life together? We must put ourselves in the uncomfortable places where human beings live, breathe, and hurt—because those are the places where we will also find Jesus.

Sometimes we wonder how we can make a difference – so often, the answer is just to take the time to be present. This sounds simple, but it isn't easy – it takes courage to be present. We don't know what difficult truth we might hear, and so we urgently rush to find solutions – to alleviate this person's suffering, and in turn, our own pain in hearing it and witnessing to it. We often seek solutions, asking, “What can I do? How can I fix it?”

Rather than jumping in with answers, what does it look like to connect, to listen deeply to the stories, the pain, the suffering. May we strive to be present, to bear witness – God does this and we are called to do this, as well.