

OUR WOUNDS CAN BE A SOURCE OF STRENGTH

Lent 3A February 24, 2008

A sermon based upon Henri Nouwen's The Wounded Healer, Ch. IV

Adam and Eve had an ideal marriage. He didn't have to hear about all the men she could have married, and she didn't have to hear about the way his mother cooked.

The story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well is indeed rich with wisdom and spiritual insight. Today, I want to focus upon the woman's wounds and Jesus' response to those wounds because it can help us to begin to see our own wounds as gifts in our ministry to one another.

Henri Nouwen shared the following story from the Talmud. Rabbi Yoshua ben Levi came upon Elijah the prophet while he was standing at the entrance of Rabbi Simeron's cave. He asked Elijah, "When will the Messiah come?" Elijah replied, "Go and ask him yourself." "Where is he?" "Sitting at the gates of the city." "How shall I know him?" "He is sitting among the poor covered with wounds. The others unbind all their wounds at the same time and then bind them up again. But he unbinds one at a time and binds it up again, saying to himself, 'Perhaps I shall be needed: if so I must always be ready so as not to delay for a moment.' "

The Messiah, the story tells us, is sitting among the poor, binding his wounds one at a time, waiting for the moment when he will be needed. So it is too with you and I as followers of Jesus and servants of God. Since it is our task to make visible the love of God, we must bind our own wounds carefully in anticipation of the moment when we will be needed. We are called to be wounded healers, the ones who must not only look after our own wounds, but at the same time, be prepared to minister to and bind up the wounds of others.

The Talmud story suggests that, because Messiah binds his own wounds one at a time, he would not have to take time to prepare himself if asked to help someone else. He would be ready to help. Jesus has given this story a new fullness by making his own broken body the way to health, liberation, and new life. Thus, like Jesus, we who proclaim hope and the Good News of God's love are called now and today – not if and when we achieve "perfection" and are completely healed. We are called now and today to make our wounds into a major source of our capacity to touch and heal the lives of others.

But what are our wounds? They are all those experiences in life that have left us fearful and resistant to giving our hearts away to others. Some of us grew up in families where there was much anger and hostility. Some of us were physically, or sexually, or emotionally abused and traumatized. Some of us were abandoned or forgotten to one extent or another. But whatever the particular experience, the result has been to make us afraid to ever be really vulnerable again. This is the case with the Samaritan woman at the well. She had been through five marriages and was co-habiting with another man. In other words, she was deeply wounded; so wounded as to make her afraid to enter into risky, vulnerable, intimate loving relationships with men, her God, and even herself.

Notice that Jesus did not condemn her. He simply held up a mirror so she could see herself honestly and then he invited her to enter into a new chapter in her life. This new chapter would be one that would begin with her allowing herself to be vulnerable enough to drink deeply from the well of God's love and acceptance for her. It would be a new chapter of hope and

restoration in her life. It would be a new chapter in which she would one day come to use her own wounds to understand, empathize with, and minister to the fears and pain of others.

How can our wounds become a source of healing for other injured people? We begin by trusting in the love and acceptance of God enough to face and look honestly at our secret wounds. In other words, we stop running away and we stand in the love of God that is already in and through and all around us. We begin by doing whatever we need to do to find healing.

For most of us, that will involve some form of professional counseling and psychotherapy. And this will need to be supplemented with the study of sacred literature and participation in life-giving, support relationships.

Once we have found the courage and support to begin our own journey into self-awareness and healing, we move into a place where we can be more open and honest with others about who we really are. We learn to speak and to share out of both our places of happiness and our places of pain and woundedness. As you become more and more "OK" with the story of your own pain and injuries, you become more and more able to serve as a conduit for the love and healing of God. Nouwen wrote, "Many words, such as care and compassion, understanding and forgiveness, fellowship and community, have been used for the healing task of the Christian minister. I like to use the word hospitality. Hospitality is the virtue which allows us to break through the narrowness of our own fears and to open our houses to the stranger. Hospitality makes anxious disciples into powerful witnesses and carriers of God's infectious hope and love.

"Hospitality is the ability to pay attention to the guest. This is very difficult, since we are preoccupied with our own needs, worries and tensions, which prevent us from taking distance from ourselves in order to pay attention to others. Not long ago I met a parish priest. After describing his hectic daily schedule: religious services, classroom teaching, luncheons, dinner engagements, and organizational meetings, he said apologetically, 'There are so many people with so many problems, I just can't be as available as I want.' When I asked, 'Whose problems?' he was silent for a few minutes, and then more or less reluctantly said, 'I guess my own.' Indeed, his incredible activities seemed in large part motivated by fear of what he would discover when he came to a standstill. He actually said: I guess I am busy in order to avoid a painful self-concentration.' "

Our model for ministry is not the perfectly put-together saint who has every hair in place. It is the vulnerable, intimate, servant Messiah sitting among the poor, the messy and the wounded sharing all that he is, his wounds and his love, with them. AMEN