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WOUNDED HEALERS

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A few weeks ago here, we hosted our annual Crow lecture featuring Brittany K. Barnett, who spoke about her work as an attorney to win freedom for people serving unjust sentences in prison. She started her career as an accountant and then went to law school and became a corporate attorney handling mergers and acquisitions. But her heart called her to seek justice for those who had received life sentences without parole for minor, nonviolent, often first time drug offenses. What had been her unpaid night job and passion project while in law school, and then while working her corporate day job, eventually became her sole focus. She threw herself into the work using the court system and the clemency process to free people and give them a second chance at life. Since her lecture, I have been thinking about her story and it brought back a flood of memories of my first job at age 17.

With my only employment experience being babysitting, I was turned down over and over again as I sought a job during the summer before college. And so I turned to my city's youth employment program, which matches youth ages 14 to 18 with part-time summer work in a variety of sectors. My placement was with the Albany County Public Defender's Office in their alternative sentencing program. Now, I knew about New York State's Rockefeller drug laws thanks to my Unitarian Universalist Church's justice work and had actually attended Drop the Rock Rallies at our state capitol. These laws, which were finally dismantled in 2009 with bipartisan support, were still in full force at the time. Convictions for the sale or possession of relatively small amounts of drugs were met with harsh mandatory sentences. There was no judicial discretion and racial disparities in sentencing were practically written into the law.

The result was the ballooning of the prison population. 94% of drug offenders in New York prisons were Black or Latino. 80% of them were in prison for nonviolent offenses. The county's alternative sentencing program had been gutted a few years before I joined them for the summer. And so they did their work on a shoestring budget and with a tiny staff. I was tasked with updating

their referral files using the phone book, the internet as it was at the time, and making phone calls to drug, alcohol, and mental health treatment programs to get their most up-to-date contact information and printed materials. The work of this small but mighty county office was rooted in the belief that treatment and rehabilitation are better alternatives to punishment and imprisonment, especially when it comes to those struggling with addiction and mental health challenges. Their work was rooted in the belief that people can change and a belief in the possibility of healing.

Brittany K. Barnett's work here in Texas and around the country is rooted in these same beliefs and it is inspired by her own very personal wounds. When Brittany was 22 years old, her mother went to prison, the underlying reason of course being drug addiction. "It's a terrible blow for any loved one to be incarcerated," Brittany said, "but when it's your mama, it's a primal wound." She and her family had been wounded by systemic racism, by the war on drugs, and now by separation from loved ones due to incarceration. She said the experience of visiting her mother in prison for that first time and communicating through the thick plexiglass almost broke her. Her mother's incarceration happened while Brittany was applying to law school at SMU. While she initially went into corporate law, that primal wound, as she described it, plagued her until she followed her calling to help others in her situation and worse, only by helping others find healing could she herself be healed.

There are so many walking wounded in our midst, people wounded by the same forces as Brittany and her family or by other kinds of trauma or abuse or grief. The term walking wounded is used in medical settings for those who've experienced minor injuries that are able to walk away from the situation and care for themselves. And so when it comes to triaging, they are lower on the priority list for medical attention. There's so many walking wounded in our midst in need of healing, but who don't know how to make the move from walking wounded to wounded healer. The first wounded healer was in Greek mythology. The wise centaur Chiron lived his immortal life with a painful incurable wound caused by one of Hercules' arrows. Chiron chose to use this suffering to help others, becoming a legendary healer and mentor to many. The wounded healer concept was popularized in psychology by Carl Jung and in spirituality by Dutch Catholic priest Henri Nouwen.

Henri Nouwen wrote, "Nobody escapes being wounded." We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally or spiritually. The main question is not how can we hide our wounds so we don't have to be embarrassed, but how can we put our woundedness in the service of others? He said, "When our wounds cease to be a source of shame and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers." Brittany K. Barnett wrote in her memoir, "All my life, I had felt this need, this urgency to save people, to help heal them." And so instead of letting her pain be a source of shame, something that she would hide, she used it as a force for healing for those whose pain she knew something about. "The great illusion of leadership," said Henri Nouwen, "is to think that man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there."

In other words, wounded healers can be a force for healing and liberation precisely because they've been there in the desert, in the prison visitation room, in the paralyzing shame, in the depths of addiction, in the valley of grief. They can be a force for healing and liberation, not only for others, but within their own life as well. Somatic therapist Prentice Hemphill writes about

healing as the process, often lifelong, of restoring and reawakening the capacities for safety, belonging and dignity on the other side of trauma. So we find safety or we create it. We restore relationship to others and the world around us and we feel our worthiness again. This is the kind of healing that's needed not only for individuals who have experienced trauma, but for our world right now, don't you think? Safety, belonging and dignity. Imagine what would be possible if communities and nations who have experienced violence in its many forms, whether from Cornell University to Gaza to United States immigration detention facilities, if these places found and the people within them found or created safety, restored relationships and acknowledged the worthiness and agency of people.

While it's hard to heal internally and relationally without also transforming the systems in which we live and are limited, it must begin somewhere. This is the approach of the truth, racial healing and transformation work of Dr. Gail Christopher and the Kellogg Foundation put into practice in Dallas and other cities around the country by leaders like our own Jerry Hawkins, now brought by Jerry to our church, inspiring things like this month's sermon series on truth, healing, reconciliation and transformation. Did you follow that amazing chain of inspiration? Healing from the harmful impacts of racism, which harms us all, by the way, means in the words of the Kellogg Foundation to restore to wholeness, to repair damage, to set right. It begins with telling hard truths and getting to the real, real like Reverend TJ preached about last week.

Individual people to people work leads not only to personal healing, but to authentic relationship building in the face of forces that try to keep us apart. And it leads to narrative change and the transformation of systems into ones that affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all. Personal choices and the ways of being, ways that we are in the world lead to decisions in policymaking, employment, law, education, housing and more, which have a wide-reaching impact. Let me share an example from the life of someone in our own church community, and I do so with his permission. Steve Jensen is a longtime First church member and leader in our church's racial equity work. A couple years ago, he began to seriously reckon with his family's history, specifically with his ancestor's legacy of white supremacy. He started a book project called Healing White History in which he engages in deep research and courageous conversations with his racist ancestors. As his project website says, "It is one white man's attempt to heal what's broken in his lineage and in himself."

He focuses on one ancestor at a time, thoroughly researching them, digging deep into history, and then imagining a conversation with that ancestor. He asks them questions, challenges them, sits with the person and their feelings and motivations and tries to understand more deeply how their legacy lives in him. It's a process of being changed by someone else's experience, someone he's never met and never will, but who lives within him and seeing the fullness of their humanity and the ways that their racism dehumanized others and themselves. It's really hard work, but it is also healing. Instead of letting these stories, the wounds inflicted on others and the wounds passed down from generation to generation in his family, instead of letting those be a source of shame, they become a force for healing, informing where Steve shows up in his life and what he supports. And this is wounded healer work.

Steve says that ultimately the project has helped him to feel more connected to his ancestors and has helped him to connect with the people and communities surrounding him here in ways that

work toward healing and wholeness. As I reflected and read about healing in preparation for this sermon, a word that kept coming up is kinship. Kinship meaning the social bonds that make us part of a larger whole, whether that kinship is with blood family or with humanity or with all of creation. Historian and theologian John Dominic Crossan wrote about what the healing miracles of Jesus and the Christian scriptures have to teach us about the real meaning of healing and how it differs from curing. Now I know Unitarian Universalists are suspicious of faith healing and typically reject the stories of Jesus's healing that have been used to claim his divine authority, but stick with me here for a second.

Crossan wrote, "Whatever the actual disease, the illness was in the separation from family and village, a fate close to death in the ancient Mediterranean world of dyadic face-to-face culture where one took one's identity from the eyes of others. Such an illness, Jesus healed by refusing to stay separate from the sick person, by touching him and thereby confronting others with a challenge and a choice." Now, Jesus wasn't curing illnesses like a doctor. He was healing people through proximity, confronting the fractures in communities and restoring kinship. Finding or creating kinship like Steve is doing with his ancestors is about seeing and being seen, about realizing or making real the connections between parts of ourselves or between ourselves and others, even in places of brokenness or woundedness.

"How do we rebuild a society where kinship has been fractured," asks Caitlin Curtis, the author of today's reading. The poem I shared earlier about the merging and healing of parts of Curtis's identity was conceived and written during a retreat at which she participated in a powerful ritual of fracture and healing. In this ritual, the group gathered in a circle, took strings of twine and stretched them across the circle. And then one by one, they cut the strings, reminding the group that while communities like theirs are connected, they're also fractured. And then they found new partners and tied those severed strings with their frayed ends back together, symbolizing the possibility of healing. "The scars that are left will tell us a story of healing," she wrote.

And so I wonder what are the scars that you carry that tell a story of healing? When you see those scars, whether they are carried by an individual or by a community, let them be a reminder and a source of hope. My hope is that your scars and the story they tell over time may become a source of strength that moves you to be a force for healing and liberation for others, because only those who have been in the desert themselves can lead others out of it. The telling of these stories is part of the healing work our congregation is doing through our racial equity initiatives.

We're telling the story of this church and the city where we've been worshiping since 1899, integrating both the high points and the times when we fell short of our values and highest aspirations, integrating who we've been and who we hope to become. This truth telling is part of changing the narrative, shaping the narrative, moving toward healing, transformation and justice. There is a larger wholeness of which we are a part. When the world inflicts harm on our bodies and spirits, one wounded soul can lead another wounded soul back to this wholeness. And this is what church is about, healing and changing the world, making it a better place. It begins within us and between us and grows from there. Yes.

Prentice Hemphill says, "Healing helps us fight in the places we need to, but love in the places we long to." I love that. "Healing helps us fight in the places we need to, but love in the places we long

to." That is when we love ourselves and each other into healing and greater wholeness, we are able to fight in the places we need to challenge our ancestors, to challenge harmful stories, to challenge laws, to challenge systems that inflict wounds and to build a world in which the response to these wounds is a movement towards safety, belonging, dignity and love. That is healing. May it be so for you, for our community and for our world. Amen.