

Like a Herd of Elephants
Healing Sunday, Feb. 3, 2019
Rev. Sarah Campbell

Do you any of you have a healing story? I do. I'm not sure why this memory clings so strongly to me. Nothing really happened. But something must have happened.

It was a hard time in my life. I remember that. Don't remember what was going on. It was probably connected to the demon perfectionism that can cause anxiety or depression. I was in my late 20s. I could have stayed home that Sunday morning. Stayed under the covers. Slept in. I'm surprised I didn't. But I got myself to church, First Congregational, over by the U., where I worshipped occasionally. I sat in the back pew. But then I actually went in for coffee hour. That must have taken some courage, because I didn't really know people. I can remember sitting on the white couch at the side of the room. Then an older woman, probably the age I am now, came over and just sat down next to me. I don't remember what we talked about. It was probably mostly small talk. Looking back now, I bet she had a sense that I was hurting. But she didn't probe. She was just with me. I don't remember how long we sat together, not super long. Don't remember who she was. Like I said, nothing really happened. I still had my stuff to deal with. And yet something happened. It was real human connection. It was communion. And it healed my heart somehow.

Sometimes we get the words curing and healing mixed up. Curing is more about fixing a body part and healing is more about blessing the whole-- body, spirit, mind. Sometimes, like in today's bible story, they go together—curing and healing. Sometimes they don't. A person may not be cured of a disease but may find a healing of their heart and a fullness of life that they have never experienced before.

The bible story today of the healing of the paralytic, the person who couldn't walk-- maybe his body really was paralyzed or maybe there was some emotional or spiritual paralysis or maybe both. We will never know. And we don't need to. The story just causes us to think and to wonder about deep things in life. Maybe what is most important about this story is how his friends surround him, not leaving him alone. Is the story telling us that community is good for us? good for our health? That we need one another?

Did you know that loneliness is at an all-time high in our society? That there are more lonely people now than before? There is less neighborliness, less participation in church or synagogue, less involvement in clubs, less sense of community and belonging than in years past.

Did you know that persistent loneliness can impair health by raising levels of stress hormones and inflammation, which in turn can increase the risk of heart disease, arthritis, Type 2 diabetes, dementia and even suicide?

Did you know that regular attendance in religious services correlates to better sleep, better health, lower blood pressure, longer life?

Our health as a human being is dependent on a lot of things. Yes, Access to health care. But also access to parks and healthy food and safe housing and freedom from oppressions, like racism, sexism, ableism. And community! Isolation harms our souls *and* our bodies.

I'm not very good at small talk. I'm the type that goes from "Wow its cold out there isn't it?" to "what are you most passionate about in life?" in about 30 seconds. But I'm learning the importance of small talk. Small talk is kind of like the filament of the spider that, one strand at a time, eventually weaves a web... You may look back after months or years at Mayflower, where you now feel as though you belong, and wonder at how it happened.... It was just one thread of conversation, even small talk, at a time and simply being present...and before you know it you know that you belong.

And like the Bible story, about friends who won't give up on their friend, "we got you", you're ours, we won't give up on you. Just think of all the ways in our community that we "hold" you when you are hurting. A Prayer shawl, a hot dish, a Befriender, cards and emails, scooching in next to you in the pew, prayers, even square dancing. All these are infusions of the spirit of love that have a powerful healing effect.

Did you know Trudy Genrich? Trudy had a sixth sense. She was like that woman who sat down next to me when I was young. Trudy seemed to know when to sidle up to someone, not intrusively, but gently just being kind, just being with you, maybe even just talking about the weather...

In the bible story study the hurting one says with resignation, when it looks too crowded to get Jesus attention... "It's okay. Just take me home." "No" his friends said. "We won't give up on you."

This reminds me of something I read in a book recently by a Princeton Professor. She is really smart. Writes lots of books. About religion. About how all the Jesus stories are second, third, fourth hand accounts. About how different story tellers have different ways of telling the story. That they are not factual accounts. She's really smart. *And* she goes to church. When she first set foot in a church, it even surprised her. But church has become essential to her life, especially during some very hard times, mostly because of the people, the community. Listen to something she writes about her own life, and I'll end with these few sentences, about an experience that helped heal her heart after a terrible loss. Listen:

No one spoke to us of what had happened, but I was surprised and moved to sense that some of them surely knew. They surrounded us with unspoken care, acting on some protective instinct, like elephants who nudge the wounded into the center of the herd so that instead of falling behind, they keep moving along with the others. (Pagels)

Now, Let us move more deeply into our time of worship together... let us move into the holy and mysterious and ancient ritual of communion that we don't completely understand but that we know helps to heal our hearts....

Sources

Brody, Jane, "A Road Map Out of Loneliness", New York Times, June 26, 2018.

Brody, Jane, "To Counter Loneliness, Find Ways to Connect", New York Times, June 25, 2018.

Craddock, Fred, Interpretation: Luke, John Knox, 1990.

Pagels, Elaine, Why Religion?: A Personal Story. Harper Collins, 2018.

Routledge, Clay, "Suicides Are Up." New York Times, June 24, 2018.

Turner, Laura, "Internet Church Isn't Really Church", New York Times, Dec. 16, 2018.

Tutu, Desmond, Children of God: Storybook Bible, Zondervan, 2010.

