

Message for the Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 18, 2018

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

Betsy Headrick McCrae

Scripture passages: Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 12:20-26

Knowing Jesus

Bruce and I spent last week in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, learning about trauma and responses to trauma. We took the Eastern Mennonite University STAR training. STAR stands for Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience. We did this in preparation for our upcoming MCC assignment. We don't expect to be dealing first-hand with trauma – though of course horrible things can happen in anyone's life anywhere. However we will be supervising folks who will likely be responding to traumatic events. And our MCC programs often include helping folks deal with trauma. We wanted to have a better understanding of how this works.

As we went through this training, our scripture passages for today were rolling around in the back of my mind. "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts," from Jeremiah. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." That's Jesus speaking in the gospel of John. From time to time during our training I would see a connection between what we were learning and these ancient words. I want to share these connections with you this morning.

Through the prophet Jeremiah God says to the people of Israel, "No longer shall you teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for you shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest." In other words, God says, I'm going to change your way of knowing. That, we learned, is what healing from trauma is all about, changing a way of knowing.

Trauma is defined as the emotional or physical harm resulting from violent conflict, natural disasters or societal structure. When folks experience trauma, things change. Trauma effects the body, mind, spirit and relationships. The world is turned upside-down. What once seemed safe is now fraught with danger. What once was solid ground now feels like shifting sand. Knowing is not what it used to be. Post-trauma our brains develop defensive, fearful ways of thinking which override everything else.

Brains are amazing organs. Very complicated. Very powerful. And, we learned, very adaptable as well. We may feel trapped in hurtful, fearful patterns of thinking and reacting, but we don't have to stay there. We can develop a different way of knowing. According to Linda Graham, who wrote an article entitled, "The Neuroscience of Resilience," it is quite possible to redirect our neural pathways so that healthier patterns will result. So that healing can happen. So that life can take on new meaning.

It all happens in our prefrontal cortex, Ms. Graham explains. That's the part upfront. The part which calms down stress and quells the fear response of our amygdala or "lizard brain." The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain which regulates emotions. It's what allows us to consciously feel, recognize and hold the waves of emotions as they move through our body.

I was struck by her illustration of how this can work for the good. She writes: "One way to hold and process a strong, negative emotion is to allow the emotion; feel it fully and compassionately; and then skillfully allow a very positive pro-social emotion like gratitude, kindness, or compassion to arise also; allow the two emotions to be present at the same time. When the positive emotion is felt in the body strongly enough, the neural circuitry of the two emotions will begin to pair together, fire together and wire

together. The positive emotion will literally rewire the neural firing of the negative emotion.” Amazing! The positive emotion will literally rewire the neural firing of the negative emotion. This is a neurological example of good being stronger than evil, of love being stronger than hate.

We did a lot of exercises during our week of training. I am going to ask you to participate in one this morning. It is an exercise which can help us understand how this integrated – bad with the good – and potentially transformative way of knowing works. We can practice creating the inner space where negative emotions can be skillfully felt, processed and moved through so that we don’t get hijacked or held hostage by them.

Exercise

First, sit quietly and comfortably. Close your eyes, if you want to. Breathe gently into your belly, slowly in and out, bringing a sense of goodness into your belly. Breathe into your belly as though you were safe.

Now, remember people or things in your life that you are grateful for. Savor the gratefulness throughout your body. Remember moments of kindness in your life. Savor the feeling of kindness throughout your body. Remember a moment of feeling loved and cherished by someone and loving them back. This can be a person, a pet, or the generous, welcoming Spirit of God. Savor the feeling of love throughout your body.

Now bring into this place of well-being a memory of loss, sadness or grief. Remain mindful of the feeling of the positive state of your body, and allow the feeling of sadness to be present in your body at the same time. Simply notice what’s happening to the feeling state in your body, noticing and being with. And when you’re ready, let them move through.

End of exercise

Integrating the bad with the good so that the good can shape and transform the outcome, is a godly way of knowing, I think. It does not ignore or gloss over what is difficult. There's no denial of the pain or the fear. Instead it holds both. It allows for new ways of knowing. It allows for new neural pathways to be created. It allows us to move on in healthy ways, to not be held hostage by our pain or our fear.

Holding the difficult and the transcendent together is required if we really want to know Jesus. He's explicit about this. Let's look again at our passage from the gospel of John. At the Passover festival in Jerusalem some strangers approach the disciples and say, "We wish to see Jesus." When the disciples tell Jesus, his response at first seems appropriate: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Yes, we think, it is time for him to be recognized and made known. But then he goes on: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." If you want to see me, if you really want to know me, he says, you have to be ready to take the bad with the good.

We have to take the bad with the good. We can fight this, but it won't do any good. The more we fight it, the more harmful it is to us. Or we can choose to hold the bad together with the good, trusting that if we do so somehow new neural pathways will be created, trusting that love is indeed stronger than hate, that life is stronger than death and that good will prevail. It's not a quick fix or a guarantee of smooth sailing. But it is the stuff of life. And it is what is ultimately real.

In a world full of pain, uncertainty and death we are called to be carriers of life. This requires resilience and the willingness to enter into difficult places. It requires the ability to stay open and receptive, to hold pain alongside goodness, trusting in goodness' transformative power. This is ultimately what God is all about; we see that revealed in Jesus. This is what our hurting world needs.

I want to share with you a poem which was in the materials we received at our training. It is by Kenneth Boulding. He writes:

How to endure, when all around us die
Nations and gracious cities, homes and men,
And the sweet earth is made a filthy den
Beneath whose roof black, belching vultures fly:
How to endure the darkness, when the sky
Is totally eclipsed by evil, when
Foul grinning chaos spreads its reign again
And all good things in senseless ruin lie.
Must we be hard as a stone? It wears to dust.
As stiff as oaks? But they untimely break.
As pitiless as steel? It turns to rust,
And time from pyramids will ruins make.
In violence, decay, starvation, need,
What can endure? Only the living seed.

End of poem

Only the living seed. We follow Jesus into the sometimes ugly, sometimes beautiful fullness of life. Holding the bad with the good. Integrating pain and loss with the love and gratitude that we know to be real. Trusting that if we do this, transformation will happen, new neural pathways will indeed be formed and good will prevail. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Dear God, open our hearts. Help us to truly know you with our minds, our bodies and our spirits. Help us to trust that good will prevail. Amen.