

**God On The Cross—
THE WOUNDED HEALER**

**Isaiah 53:1-8, 11-12
I Peter 2:21-25**

*The death of Jesus heals our wounds, reconciling us to
God and empowering us to live for others.*

A sermon preached by
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First United Methodist Church
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“I saw a strange sight. I stumbled upon a story most strange, like nothing in my life, my street sense, my sly tongue had ever prepared me for. Hush, child. Hush now, and I will tell it to you.

Even before the dawn one Friday morning I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking the alleys of our City. He was pulling an old cart filled with clothes both bright and new, and he was calling in a clear tenor voice: 'Rags!' Ah, the air was foul and the first light filthy to be crossed by such sweet music.

'Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!'

'Now this is a wonder,' I thought to myself, for the man stood six-foot-four, and his arms were like tree limbs, hard and muscular, and his eyes flashed intelligence. Could he find no better job than this, to be a ragman in the inner city?

I followed him. My curiosity drove me. And I wasn't disappointed.

Soon the ragman saw a woman sitting on her back porch. She was sobbing into a handkerchief, signing, and shedding a thousand tears. Her knees and elbows made a sad X. Her shoulders shook. Her heart was breaking.

The Ragman stopped his cart. Quietly, he walked to the woman, stepping round tin cans, dead toys, and Pampers.

'Give me your rag,' he said gently. 'and I'll give you another.'

He slipped the handkerchief from her eyes. She looked up, and he laid across her palm a linen cloth so clean and new that it shined. She blinked from the gift to the giver.

Then, as he began to pull his cart again, the Ragman did a strange thing: he put her stained handkerchief to his own face; and then he began to weep, to sob as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet she was left without a tear.

'This is a wonder,' I breathed to myself, and I followed the sobbing Ragman like a child who cannot turn away from mystery.

'Rags! Rags! New Rags for old!'

In a little while, when the sky showed grey behind the rooftops and I could see the shredded curtains hanging out black windows, the

Ragman came upon a girl whose head was wrapped in a bandage, whose eyes were empty. Blood soaked her bandage. A single line of blood ran down her cheek.

Now the tall Ragman looked upon this child with pity, and he drew a lovely yellow bonnet from his cart.

'Give me your rag,' he said, tracing his own line on her cheek, 'and I'll give you mine.'

The child could only gaze at him while he loosened the bandage, removed it, and tied it to his own head. The bonnet he set on hers. And I gasped at what I saw: for with the bandage went the wound! Against his brow it ran a darker, more substantial blood -- his own!

'Rags! Rags! I take old rags!' cried the sobbing, bleeding, strong, intelligent Ragman.

The sun hurt both the sky, now, and my eyes; the Ragman seemed more and more to hurry.

'Are you going to work?' he asked a man who leaned against a telephone pole. The man shook his head. The Ragman pressed him: 'Do you have a job?'

'Are you crazy?' sneered the other. He pulled away from the pole, revealing the right sleeve of his jacket -- flat, the cuff stuffed into the pocket. He had no arm.

'So,' said the Ragman. 'Give me your jacket, and I'll give you mine.'

So much quiet authority in his voice!

The one-armed man took off his jacket. So did the Ragman -- and I trembled at what I saw: for the Ragman's arm stayed in its sleeve, and when the other put it on, he had two good arms, thick as tree limbs; but the Ragman had only one.

'Go to work,' he said.

After that he found a drunk, lying unconscious beneath an army blanket, an old man, hunched, wizened, and sick. He took that blanket and wrapped it round himself, but for the drunk he left new clothes.

And now I had to run to keep up with the Ragman. Though he was weeping uncontrollably, and bleeding freely at the forehead, pulling

his cart with one arm, stumbling for drunkenness, falling again and again, exhausted, old, old, and sick, yet he went with terrible speed. On spider's legs he skittered through the alleys of the City, this mile and the next, until he came to its limits, and then he rushed beyond.

I wept to see the change in this man. I hurt to see his sorrow. And yet I need to see where he was going in such haste, perhaps to know what drove him so.

The little old Ragman -- he came to a landfill. He came to the garbage pits. And I waited to help him in what he did but I hung back, hiding. He climbed a hill. With tormented labor he cleared a little space on that hill. Then he signed. He lay down. He pillowed his head on a handkerchief and a jacket. He covered his bones with an army blanket. And he died.

Oh how I cried to witness that death! I slumped in a junked car and wailed and mourned as one who has no hope -- because I had come to love the Ragman. Every other face had faded in the wonder of this man, and I cherished him; but he died. I sobbed myself to sleep.

I did not know -- how could I know? -- that I slept through Friday night and Saturday and its night too.

But then, on Sunday morning, I was wakened by a violence.

Light -- pure, hard, demanding light -- slammed against my sour face, and I blinked, and I looked, and I saw the first wonder of all. There was the Ragman, folding the blanket most carefully, a scar on his forehead, but alive! And, besides that, healthy! There was no sign of sorrow or age, and all the rags that he had gathered shined for cleanliness.

Well, then I lowered my head and, trembling for all that I had seen, I myself walked up to the Ragman. I told him my name with shame, for I was a sorry figure next to him. Then I took off all my clothes in that place, and I said to him with dear yearning in my voice: 'Dress me.'

He dressed me. My Lord, he put new rags on me, and I am a wonder beside him. The Ragman, the Ragman, the Christ!"¹

It's great to be home after our spring break ski trip with the youth. It was a marvelous trip, a beautiful area, and a wonderful time to build relationships with some of our youth and parents. And literally 40 years after my last ski trip, I was able to ski—on snow, downhill, on the easy slopes, but the old guy was out there!

Nevertheless, I'm glad to get home. The thought never crossed my mind to stay in Colorado and be a ski bum. Wherever I go, I always want to come home. "Home" is one of the most powerful images we have for the life we want. Even if your actual home life is troubled, the idea of a real, good, happy home is something you want.

I'll never forget a man who was a church member in a previous church. I had counseled with him and his wife about some marital difficulties. Then he had a heart attack. After he got home from the hospital, his relationship with his wife did not improve. I went by to see him one day, and he began to pour out his heart about his illness and his marriage. Finally he put his head in his hands and said, "Brother Bud, I just want to go *home!*"

I thought, "Dude, we're sitting in your living room." But he wasn't talking about a physical home. My friend wanted a spiritual and emotional home, a place where he could be happy and feel secure and be whole again. He just wanted to be healed.

This Lent we have been looking at the cross from different angles. We are taking time to do this because in many ways the cross is our home. The cross is our spiritual center, our source for understanding the world and life. We've talked about the death of Jesus as a sacrifice, and we've looked at the cross as a legal substitution for the judgment of our sin. In different situations or seasons of your life, these different images or ideas may be more or less meaningful to you. Ultimately, all these different metaphors are ways of describing this incredible truth: that God wants to be in relationship with us, that God wants to reconcile the gap that separates us, that God wants to justify us—set us right—so we can live with him now and forever. This is called atonement—"at-one-ment."

Today I want to introduce another way of thinking about the cross: Jesus as our Wounded Healer. “Wounded Healer” is a phrase that was introduced by Catholic priest Henri Nouwen in a book by that title in 1972, and it’s been a powerful image ever since. We often think of Jesus as a healer; there are a bunch of stories in the Gospels about him healing somebody. We call him the Great Physician. But on the cross, Jesus is a Wounded Healer. He suffered the wounds that bring us healing. He died the death that brings us life. So one of the ways that we can understand the cross and understand atonement is to see the cross as therapeutic. The crucifixion of Christ is an act of healing.

The disease that is healed by the cross is sin. Sin cuts us off from God. Sin reduces our human potential. Jesus dies to heal the sickness of sin. The gaping wound of our transgression is made whole again by the grace and love Jesus showed on the cross.

The roots of this image of healing come from the prophet Isaiah. There are four poems in the book of Isaiah called the songs of the Suffering Servant. The most familiar one is in Isaiah 53. In that Scripture that we read a moment ago, Isaiah talks about the Suffering Servant bearing the wounds for God’s people, being crushed for the sins of others, and dying because of the rebellion of the people against God.

This Hebrew Scripture was applied early and often to Jesus, because what Jesus did on the cross seemed perfectly parallel to what Isaiah was talking about in the Suffering Servant. So Peter almost quotes Isaiah when he says, “*He carried in his own body on the cross the sins we committed. He did this so that we might live in righteousness, having nothing to do with sin. By his wounds you were healed. Though you were like straying sheep, you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your lives.*”²

When Henri Nouwen brought out the idea of the Wounded Healer, he explained that the wounds of the healer make him vulnerable, but not weak. The vulnerability of the Wounded Healer opens up a

pathway to relationship. Because the healer suffers, we know that he understands our suffering. He can relate to us. So we can trust him.

Think of a doctor who is vulnerable with her patients. She is not just cold and analytical and clinical in her diagnosis and treatment. She sympathizes with you. She prays with you. If it's not going well, she cries with you. Are you going to trust that doctor? Are you going to love that doctor?

The Wounded Healer is wonderfully illustrated in the "Ragman" piece by Walter Wangerin. Isn't that a perfect picture of the Christ? The Ragman not only restores health and wholeness to those who are suffering, but he takes the wound on himself. He cries for the one who is sad. He bleeds for the bleeder. He literally gives his right arm to help the disabled man. He enters so completely into the human condition that it takes away his life. That is the work of Jesus on the cross. He takes the disease of sin upon himself and restores us to wholeness again.

This image of atonement was John Wesley's favorite. He thought salvation was basically a process of healing. He said the essence of true religion is "a therapy by which the Great Physician heals our sin-diseased souls, restoring the vitality of life that God intended for us."³ This process starts with the pardon of Christ, which we accept by faith. Then the Holy Spirit works in us gradually to become more and more holy. Finally we die and are resurrected into heaven, where we are completely and eternally healed. Pardon is salvation begun; holiness is salvation continued; and heaven is salvation finished. Wesley scholar Randy Mattox puts it this way: "Wesley understood human salvation in its fullest sense to include deliverance (1) immediately from the *penalty* of sin, (2) progressively from the *plague* of sin, and (3) [ultimately] from the very *presence* of sin and its effects."⁴

So salvation is a process of healing, and Jesus is the Wounded Healer. So what? What does this mean for us today? What difference does it make for me on Monday?

The primary implication of the idea of atonement as healing is that Christ heals us so that we can give ourselves to God and to others. We become an agent of healing in a sin-sick world. If we are in a relationship with the Wounded Healer, then we can become wounded healers for others. We are vulnerable, incomplete and in process. But we have been healed! So we can be vulnerable with people. We can be open and honest about our own struggles. In showing our wounds, we are not trying to be dramatic or pretentious—“I’ve got a bigger wound than you!”—but we are pointing to the One who heals all our wounds, no matter how big and painful they may be. This becomes our mission in the world.

This is what Henri Nouwen said: “No one can help anyone without becoming involved, without entering with his whole person into the painful situation, without taking the risk of becoming hurt, wounded or even destroyed in the process. The beginning and the end of all Christian leadership is to give your life for others. [Real witness] means a witness that starts with the willingness to cry with those who cry, laugh with those who laugh, and to make one’s own painful and joyful experiences available as sources of clarification and understanding.”⁵

I’ve seen some powerful wounded healers in my time in ministry. One of them was Joe Ogden, a man in my church in Bryant who was diagnosed with multiple myeloma—bone cancer—in 1996. While he was still in treatment for cancer, he shared his vision with me, that he would get well and start a cancer support ministry at the church. It took him about two years to get healthy enough, but he trained about a dozen people who made hospital visits for the church and community. When he retired, he became a part-time chaplain for the Cancer Center at UAMS. Over the next 18 years, Joe had one recurrence of myeloma and two bouts with colon cancer, but if he could stand and walk, he was encouraging people who were also suffering. Just hearing his story gave people strength.

In August of 2014, Joe was completely healed in heaven. About a month before he died, he posted on Facebook: “When you are troubled, comfort someone more troubled; when lonely, reach out to someone lonelier; and when unsure, give encouragement to the weary. To care for another makes us forget our own sorrows. Through my friends at [the church], neighbors and relatives, you have comforted me. I ask you to pray for me now to be a comforter.”

I responded, “Like you haven’t been a comforter to hundreds in the last twenty years. But therein lies the key to joy.”

And Joe wrote back, “Those whom I’ve been able to help, the act of doing so has blessed and continues to bless me more than I can ever tell you. When I was a young renegade several years ago and left the church, I never dreamed that when I finally surrendered to the Lord, such joy could be had being a practicing Christian.”

Our joy is found in our connection with our Wounded Healer, Jesus Christ. No matter where we are on our journey, we are in need of his constant healing grace. Sometimes we need physical healing, emotional healing, spiritual healing, or the healing of a relationship in our lives. Jesus knows your need even better than you do.

So we will invite you in a moment to come forward for anointing and healing prayer. You may want to come and lift up the need of a friend or family member. When you come, someone will make the sign of the cross on your forehead with oil and say something like, “I anoint you with oil in the name of Jesus Christ. May God grant you prayers for healing.” At the same time, another person will put a comforting hand on your shoulder and pray silently for you. You don’t have to say a word. If you would like to kneel at the prayer rails for a time of prayer, please do. If you would like to pray with me about a specific need for healing, just cup your hands and lift them up, and I will come pray with you.

Salvation and healing are a process. Today may be a start in the process for you or just another step on the way. Whatever it is, take the step today. Be open and vulnerable to the One who opened his

arms to the sin of the whole world. This is the purpose of the cross. This is the meaning of God's love. This is the way for you to come home.

¹ Walter Wangerin, Jr., *The Ragman and Other Cries of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 3-6. Done as a dramatic reading in the service.

² I Peter 2:24f.

³ Randy L. Mattox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Kingswood Books, 1994), 145.

⁴ Mattox, 143.

⁵ Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 72.