**Understanding Trauma and the Christian Response**

How should a Christian respond to trauma -- our own and that of those we encounter -- those God calls into our care and into our lives? It sure feels like the world is full of trauma today; yet, where is the Biblical guidance? Where are Jesus’ words?

A simple definition of a traumatic event is an experience in which a person perceives oneself or another to be threatened with annihilation. We can expand the definition of a traumatic event to say that it provokes a feeling of utter helplessness on the part of the survivor; in other words, we can do nothing to stop the event. So often we feel that today.

If our faith is to help us make meaning and connect to God and to others, trauma is a faith crisis! Jesus often said to those who suffered and reached out to him, “Your faith has made you well.” Consider, for example, the story recorded in Mark 5 of the woman “who had a flow of blood for twelve years (!),” who comes to Jesus after she had “suffered much under many physicians and had spent all that she had (!) and was no better but rather grew worse (!!)” who is healed after merely touching Jesus’ garment. In response to this simple act, Jesus says, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace” (v.34). Jesus responds similarly to the ten lepers ([Luke 17:19](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2017.19)), Bartimaeus, a blind beggar ([Luke 18:42](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2018.42) and Mark 10), to the Centurion from Capernaum (Matthew 8), and to the Syrophoenician woman (Matthew 15; Mark 7). When “a sinful woman” washed Jesus’ feet with her tears, he told her much the same thing: “Your faith has saved you” ([Luke 7:50](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%207.50)). These are wonderful stories about the power of faith; yet, for many of us, reaching out to Jesus or to anyone is very hard. The very words, “Your faith has made you well,” are not words of hope or comfort but self-condemnation and self-hatred. “There is something wrong with me”; “I don’t have enough faith”; “My faith has NOT made ME well.”

Psychologists who study trauma teach us that traumatic events create effects that last much longer than the time of their occurrence. Consider, for example, two symptoms connected to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). First, there is emotional numbing and cognitive shutdown. Much of the literature on trauma survivors describes this dimension of trauma by talking about the absolute silence that sits at the heart of traumatic experience. When we are overwhelmed, what fails us most profoundly is our capacity to use language, to communicate meaning from one person to another. Second, there is the compulsion to repeat the trauma in our minds. Over and over and over again it is as if the mind becomes stuck in the terrifying event. The mind’s meaning-making structures have collapsed, so it simply repeats and recycles. We may eventually find some temporary relief until a smell or sight or sound sucks us back into our tidal pool of terror. In addition, PTSD consists of symptoms such as memory loss, dissociative episodes, a profound sense of powerlessness, feelings of being haunted by intrusive memories and repetitive thought patterns, an ongoing state of hyperarousal, and perhaps most painfully, a loss of basic trust and the capacity to meaningfully relate to others. Because traumatic violence so decisively violates one’s personal-physical-emotional borders, the desire to build emotional protective armor around oneself becomes all-consuming and, sadly, results in a sense of dramatic isolation. It is sure hard to reach out to Jesus or anyone in such a state. We cannot hear the “Come to me, all you who are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.”

Normally the information that we receive in experience goes through a kind of time-stamping machine that marks it for storage in the appropriate part of the brain. When a traumatic experience occurs, the information rushes in too fast and furiously to be marked: it leaps over the time-stamper and, because it cannot be processed and stored, simply wanders and consistently replays itself. When this occurs, a person finds oneself, often inexplicably, reenacting the scene of violence, either in self-destructive actions (various forms of self-abuse) or in violent actions unleashed against others.

My experience in the church, is that the folks who are disruptive, not necessarily physically violent, but who do violence against the ministry of a church are replaying a painful inner drama borne of their own pain. Sometimes, it becomes so habituated that we can predict how they will react to any event or in any encounter. Maybe we recognize ourselves in this drama. What are we to do?

Serene Jones, a Pastoral counselor and theologian reminds us, “The church is called, as it exists in this space of trauma, to engage in the crucial task of reordering the collective imagination of its people and to be wise and passionate in this task.” As people of faith, the church enables us to be storytellers, weavers, artists, poets, and visionaries who take the repetitive violence and reframe it in the context of the story of our faith. We are called to help write the scripts of the Christian imagination as it seeks to bring order to this disorder, and we must do so in a manner that seeks the flourishing of all people. To those of us from Protestant church traditions, taking up this task of “telling stories” and “recrafting imagination” in a time of trauma may seem both too much and too little to ask. It seems to be too much because, in many ways, the church conceded its storytelling, meaning-making powers years ago, giving over its imaginative sway to science, to experts, to the rational certainty of modernity. And it seems to be too little because as good United Methodists we want action, to step into the streets and get things done. In this context, telling the story of faith seems too passive, too aesthetic and remote, an extravagance for happier and simpler times. However, an understanding of trauma and particularly of collective trauma indicates that the greatest political struggle we face concerns the ordering of our collective imagination — the matter of how we tell the story of what happened to us and what continues to happen in North America and around the world. The imagination that is born out of this collective wrestling has and will continue to determine, profoundly, the future course of our actions, both domestically and internationally; and so, the churches, as distinctive and strong Christian voices, must be heard clearly in this struggle for imaginative space.

At the heart of healing are three insights useful for the theological-imaginative task. First, the person or persons who have experienced trauma need to be able to tell their story. The event needs to be spoken, pulled out of the shadows of the mind into the light of day. When we take this insight into a collective register, it means that as a community, we need to give testimony. The truth of the violence, in its full scope, must be articulated. Second, there needs to be someone to witness this testimony, a third-party presence that not only creates a safe space for speaking but also receives the words when they finally are spoken -- without judgment or advice. Collectively, as a church, we need to be willing to look hard at the events unfolding around us, see them honestly, and receive them fully. Third, the testifier and the witness (and we are both) must begin the process of telling a new, different story together; we must begin to pave a new road through the brain. This third requirement for recovery is an extremely tricky business. It does not mean forgetting the past; rather, it means re-narrating the events in such a way that agency is returned and hope (a future) is possible. All of this is aimed at breaking the cycle of repetitive violence. We change the order of the way things are and work towards preventing the enactment of similar horrors in the future. Maya Angelou speaks powerfully of the historical significance of such retelling: “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived; but if faced with courage, it need not be lived again.” To translate these three insights about recovery and healing into the language of theology, as the church, we are called to be those who testify, who try to tell the story of what happened in its fullness; those who witness, who receive the story of violence and create a safe space for its healing; those who reimage the future by telling yet again -- without denying the event of violence now woven into it -- the story of our faith. In this way, we are the hands and heart of Jesus.

Returning to the story of the hemorrhaging woman, we see the stopping of bleeding was only part of the story. We don’t know the unnamed, unspoken characters who told of Jesus or gave her the courage to reach out. Her world was one of isolation; she was separated from others because she was unclean. From somewhere she got the courage to reach out. Our first act is to encourage. We do this by loving enough to care for one another, enough to hear the story. The story doesn’t say so, but we might imagine she was likely a difficult woman, twelve years of bleeding, meant twelve years of isolation and, I suspect, blame and condemnation. While trauma can be a big event, it can also be the death by a thousand cuts, small acts of rejection over and over again.

Who was it that gave her hope, that gave her the courage to reach out for her own healing? Who made her space safe? Who heard her story without judgment? Who gave her the courage to break through her isolation and touch Jesus? Who helped her imagine a time when her bleeding would not utterly control her life?

God marks us as loved, as recipients of divine forgiveness. Marked in this way, we are freed to act not as perfect creatures, but as fallen people who are nonetheless called to persistently seek ways to embody God’s will which is the flourishing of all creation. Building on this hopeful image of ourselves, we could explore what it means for the church to be justified and sanctified in this same manner: how we become a community in the world that understands and witnesses to the depth of divine love for all people, solid in its testimony to the nature of God’s righteousness, and at the same time profoundly open to and affected by the complex and often tragic nature of human actions. What will it mean to you to claim God’s love in the midst of and in response to your own experience, and to share that love in every encounter you have, with every other person God calls into your care?

*[The work Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World by Serene Jones (Presbyterian Publishing Corp) was consulted in the development of this sermon.]*

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