

The Hands of Jesus

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May 22, 2022

My father served as a military policeman during WWII with the 44th Infantry Division. He arrived in France, through the port city of Cherbourg, in September of 1944. After a month of orientation to the European Theater of War, the soldiers of 44th moved by railroad east through France to Lune'ville, a town about 75 miles from the German border. It was there, in a forest just outside of town, the division engaged the German army for the first time since it had begun training for combat, back in the States, almost three years prior.

When my father was alive, he would tell me, with pride, stories of enduring hot and muggy combat training in the swamps of Louisiana. His face often glowed as he described (many times over) watching the Boston Red Sox play in Fenway Park, as he attended his very first major league baseball game. For a 19-year-old kid from a small town in Oregon, his world had grown immeasurably since he had enlisted to serve his country.

Soon, though, he left baseball behind and boarded a troop transport ship bound for France, where he learned that sea sickness was an enemy he had not trained to confront, and the ship's plumbing was ill-equipped to handle.

Finally, from his vantage point of a boxcar's open door, he was confronted by the reality that war, and possible death, was only a few, short days away. As the train glided through the French countryside, he would watch French civilians carefully pick their way through mined and battle-weary fields looking for

anything they might glean from the soil. In small towns, he saw children pick through garbage cans with the hope of finding some small item that might put a dent in their hunger. Like a virus spreading through a community, war, my father quickly learned, took every opportunity it could to inflict wounds and create scars as far and wide as possible.

When the 44th pushed back a German counter offensive in the forest just outside of town, my father was assigned to a security detail for a colonel who desired to survey the situation before making recommendations to his superiors. In a field near the forest, one that had been marked as cleared, one of other military policemen stepped on an undiscovered mine. The colonel, and two other enlisted men, died instantly. My father, and one other soldier, were severely wounded. The record of the day indicates that a sergeant, standing on the road next to the field, repeatedly made his way back and forth from the road to the place of the explosion, carrying both the living and the dead, from the violence the mine had unleashed to the safety of an aid truck and the possibility of healing for the wounded.

Unlike his tales of combat training and travel prior to the explosion, my father rarely spoke of the day he was on duty in that field. He did not speak of the wounds he received, the surgeries he endured, or the months of physical therapy he underwent as he learned to walk again. However, even my child's eyes could see and understand, as my father dressed and undressed, the meaning of the extensive scars he carried on his body. What I couldn't see, and what my father never revealed, were the inner wounds he sustained, the unseen tribulation of

war and the violence it brings to the mind and spirit of an individual serving their country.

The forces of violence and death believe they are the ultimate powers in our world. The means by which they assail us are legion: guns, drugs, hate-filled speech, physical or psychological violence in families, bullying on the playground or in cyberspace. Whether in war, like Ukraine, on the streets of our communities, in our schools or shopping malls, or in our families, these forces act to wound or kill, and they do not tolerate anyone who might question their right to rule over our lives.

I think that is why, like my father, we so often conceal the wounds we carry. It is as if, admitting our woundedness to one another, we would begin to chip away at the facade that violence and death are the last word and greatest power in our world.

They don't like that, and I think we all know how they shut us up; they whisper immortal words in our ears: don't admit you're hurt, don't share your wounds, people will think you're weak!

And so, we often keep hidden and let fester our deepest hurts, our most intense fears, our wounds either self or other inflicted. Communities of faith seem to be especially vulnerable to this type of wound concealment. Maybe it's because someone in the church came up with the stupid idea that having Jesus in your life means you always have sun shining out of your... well, you know where (ass). But not today!

Today is Mission Sunday, and instead of denying woundedness, we address it publicly. Over the years, our 5th and 6th graders

have spoken out about and worked to address many of the wounds our society carries. From poverty and homelessness to, this year, the struggles of the people of Central and Eastern Europe. These kids, under the guidance of Anne Baunach, are asking us to face up to, and address, what we often don't want to admit: we live in a wounded, suffering world.

They are asking us to support their mission to raise funds for Lutheran Disaster Response. 100% of the funds raised will support LDR's Eastern Europe Crisis Response. There is no waste, no overhead, no red tape. The number of individuals and families affected by the war in Ukraine is almost uncountable. It may be decades until we learn of the true magnitude and toll this war is taking, not just in terms of human lives, but also in terms of the devastation it is wreaking upon farms and forests, lakes and streams, our planet earth. Admitting the reality of the situation, though, does not mean giving into it.

That's why our reading from Revelation today is so important. It speaks of God bringing a new city, a holy city, down out of heaven and placing it upon the earth. It speaks of God and Jesus the Lamb dwelling in it, right here, in our midst! It tells of how the nations will walk by its light and process into it. It seems that God does not abandon us! In fact, God says, "People, earth, you are important. I'm setting up shop right in your midst, and I'm going to make things right, and I want you to join me in this work!" Ain't that right, 5th and 6th graders!

And how God does make things right! Listen up, "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal,

flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” Healing, for the wounds we acknowledge and share with one another!

Because Revelation says there is another story; there is another way to be human together. It is not based on violence and death, cruelty and war, wounding others in order to not be wounded ourselves. God says everything is changed, and it is changed because I am right here among you. In the season of Easter, we know this change as the real presence of Jesus, the lamb, wounded and risen, and dwelling in the heavenly city of God right here in our midst.

Taking a bit of my own advice, leading by example, I will tell you that 2022 has so far not been a kind year to me. I had my appendix removed earlier this year and was told it contained a tumor, that while benign, still raises the possibility of further mischief in my abdomen down the road. I finally got Covid, and my lingering cough is a personal and daily reminder that now over a million Americans have died from this virus. I have a severely sprained left wrist, which has prevented me from teaching the classes I love in a local yoga and barre studio.

Now, I tell you these things not as an attempt to seek your sympathy. Rather, I do so as an encouragement for all of us: being real together about our wounds, our hurts, and our scars, and the wounds of the world, is not a sign of weakness. Rather,

it is a testimony to a faith community's strength and our potential to be a truly transformative place, the Holy City, coming down out of heaven from God, into a world in hurt and need. This is why we do Mission Sunday!

This is also why I'm compelled to go back a few Sundays and reflect once again on the story of the so-called "doubting Thomas". See, I reflect on that text a little differently than most people do. Remember now: wounded themselves, and fearing the powers that be, Jesus' friends have gathered behind locked doors. Troubled and anxious, Jesus appears to them, for he will not leave his friends orphaned and alone. He brings to them a word of peace and shares with them a re-creating, reviving Spirit. He comes to us! And in our gospel today, he proclaims that he will keep coming to us through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

We all know of Thomas' reaction. Not present with the others, he will not believe, "Unless," he says, "I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side." Now, I see this as a perfectly reasonable request. Thomas wants to know that the crucified one (the friend with whom he has travelled many miles and many months) is the same person as the risen one who continues to be a companion with all of us! Here in Auburn, in the States, and in the Ukraine!

It seems important to Thomas that Jesus' wounds, and the love they signify, not be erased by the resurrection, that God does not conquer the forces of violence and death in our world by

overwhelming, incontestable power and might. Rather, it seems important, possibly for all of us who follow Jesus, that the type of love with which Jesus lived, a type of self-giving love that can be wounding, be the same love that Jesus shares with us in his resurrection today.

It is important for the people of Central and Eastern Europe too. It is important that they see Jesus wounds, that they see our wounds, and that we see theirs, because it is only in seeing that the healing may begin. It is only in the touching that believing can begin. It is only in being absolutely honest with one another that we can begin to move forward together into a better, brighter future.

When I think of this type of love, I think of the sergeant, who standing on a road, beside a field, near an aid truck, ran back and forth between road and field, offered his own life to save the lives of his wounded friends and bring peace to those who had died. I think of my father, who if he had had the chance, might have heard from this sergeant something like, “Bob, don’t kid yourself, we all share wounds from that day, and it is in sharing that truth that we become stronger, that we heal.”

The forces of violence and death, who would like us to think we live in the same world we have always lived in - and that nothing can be done - are wrong. The presence of Jesus in our lives, both wounded and risen, is God’s great “No” to any nation today which preaches the cruelty of war is the only way to victory, and the threat of violence is the only way to ensure peace. That’s what Russia wants us to believe. However, Jesus

standing with and among us is God's testimony that Russia is wrong, that we live in a changed world, that our futures can and will be different, and that love for the sake of friend or neighbor, no matter in what nation they live, even though this love can be costly, does finally bring peace and brings it abundantly.

So, good people of Messiah Lutheran, for those of you within these walls, and for those of you beyond in our wider community, I say to you, "Be not ashamed or silent about the wounds you carry, whether they be in your hands or your side, your mind or your heart, for carefully sharing our wounds with one another is the path to healing, the path to the peace Jesus brings. And sharing our wounds ultimately unites us with the wounded the world over, so that we can live the love that brings peace.

Ultimately, though, it is Jesus himself who, as both our friend and example, reaches out with his hands to our hands, to embrace us the world over and lift our wounded bodies. It is the only thing my father ever said about that day in the field, that through the fog of the explosion, his mind reeling, his vision cloudy, he saw the sergeant's outstretched hands reaching down to him, felt them picking him up, carrying his wounded body. It was the only thing my father said about that day, that he thought it was Jesus. May we, on this Mission Sunday, be the sergeant's hands for the people of Central and Eastern Europe, for Ukraine, and may they today, like my father in war 75 years ago, see our hands as Jesus' hands. **Amen.**

