

Hillcrest Congregational UCC
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All the Salve We Need
Acts 4:5-12, I John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18

I begin this morning with some ambivalent feelings. On the one hand I am very honored that your interim search committee selected me as the pastor to walk with you on your journey for the interim time. I am excited to be here, to bring what gifts I may have to offer, and to have the opportunity to be in ministry with all of you. This is a very special and sacred time in which we will have the opportunity to reflect on the ministry of Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC and to seek God's direction for the future.

On the other hand, I have already seen and heard about God's people here – dedicated staff, caring leaders, and some truly talented preachers who have graced the pulpit. I was reminded that people were eager to come and meet me and hear me preach and I must tell you, I find myself a little intimidated. I am not all that!

But when I searched my heart for the reason that I am here in this special time and place with all of you, the answer I received was I know that God has sent me. It is not about me. Oh, I have gifts God has given me to share, but I will make mistakes, for which I am already asking forgiveness and patience. But it is not about me. It is about God's purpose here and we if honor our covenant together we will see that unfold.

So, as we embark on this journey together, I ask you one to remember and to do one thing, especially if you came today to hear what this preacher has to say. Do not listen to me. Now, I am NOT asking you to take a nap or to go outside for a cup of coffee every time I step into this pulpit. NO. I am asking you to listen to God. I will do my part each week, studying, praying, and preparing a sermon that tells you what I hear God telling me to say to you. And you, well you pray and listen for what God is saying too.

That is part of our heritage. Each of us is called to study, pray, listen, and discern for ourselves and then to share together. This upholds our covenant to honor and respect each person's responsibility to discern, and to stay in relationship even when we differ. If we take the risk to share that with each other, if we truly listen to what each of us is hearing, we will discern together what God's specific purpose is here.

For we know that God's overall purpose is nothing less than miraculous- loving us and seeking us out even when we turn and run away from our Shepherd God. Even when we are broken and need healing, and we are all in need of healing, God comes and saves us from ourselves.

In our scripture from Acts Peter has come to the attention of the authorities because he has healed someone. They ask him who is it that has authorized his ministry? And Peter testifies to the salvation present in the name of Jesus.

I find this curious because throughout Jesus' ministry he went about teaching, preaching and healing people. But we hear no stories of him "saving" anyone. Instead, people come to him for healing of leprosy, epilepsy, lameness, blindness, and bleeding. One thing is common in these people. They, or a relative or friend all actively sought healing. I would like to lift up what might appear to be three exceptions.

A young man came to Jesus and asked him how he could attain the kingdom. He had done everything expected of a good Jew: so Jesus told him to sell all his belongings and to come and follow him. Nicodemus came to ask Jesus questions “after hours.” A woman was brought to Jesus and accused of adultery.

Jesus offered them all healing but they had to want to be healed. He offered them the salve, which would save them from alienation from God, each other, and even themselves, but they had to use it. The young man chose not to be healed of his idolatry of possessions. Nicodemus needed healing of his fear of what people would say if they saw him with Jesus. Jesus sent the woman away healed of her shame, but her partner in adultery did not seek healing. And her accusers were not cured of their judgmental righteousness, hypocrisy, and unforgiving attitude.

We are all made in the image of God but we all fall short of God’s glory. We are human, we all make mistakes and we all need healing. And so does our church. But to attain healing we must seek it, and we must use the salve we are offered.

As we spend time together listening to each other and telling the stories of the history here, we will find places that need healing. But there is cause for hope not fear. Today we celebrated communion before hearing this sermon. I remind you that Jesus celebrated communion with his disciples before they betrayed and denied him. He told them what would happen, yet he had already forgiven them.

God has already forgiven each of us for the past actions and omissions and the future mistakes too. God’s love is so great, so awesome, so overwhelmingly powerful, that no negative can withstand it. If we realize this, if we embrace it, how much freedom would we experience? How much of our energy would be saved from the waste of shame, of broken relationships, of regrets, of bondage to false idols and false righteousness? God has offered us all the salve we need to begin healing. We just need to apply it.

But this takes work. In order to heal and move into the future, we must look at, relive parts, and then let go of our past. We must forgive ourselves and others. We must open ourselves to new ways of being and looking at things. We must open ourselves to risk the vulnerability of new relationships. We must open ourselves to risk reconciliation of broken and lost relationships. But why would we do this? You know the answer to this. If we do not learn from our mistakes we are doomed to repeat them. Sometimes in the same way with the same people, and sometimes in very different ways with different people.

But it is also true that when we look at our past we can identify moments of joy, moments of love, moments of relationships realized that we do want to repeat. And when we open ourselves to look at new perspectives, new alternatives, new options, new resources, new relationships and networks, and new growth, “appear” that was not possible before.

Jesus had family and friends. He had a ministry which was teaching God’s love and light to all the people around him. People were healed, lives were changed. Yet, he did not hold on to his life because he knew what good would come in the future. We are a life, and death, and resurrection people. We individually and corporately know the value of life and love. We know the sorrow of death, and we know and celebrate the new hope and joy in resurrection. We know the power of this cycle of energy.

Jesus told us that there is no greater gift than can be given than to lay down one's life for a friend and he calls us friend. He also told us that the kingdom is among us now. We are not asked to lay down our lives today. But if we are to be healed, if we are to fulfill our commission to go about sharing the good news of healing that is available to everyone, the least we can do is to lay down some of our old life that gets in the way. That is the way we will begin realize the kingdom that is among us now.

God has offered us all the salve, all the love, we need to begin healing. We just need to apply it. Let us pass it around and apply it liberally.