

August 18, 2024
“Loving the Material”
1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14 / Proverbs 9:1-6
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Today, I'd like to speak from the perspective of a culture change consultant. One who actively engages with trauma healing, including intergenerational work, and one who sees healing as a return to connection with the divine spark in all of us.

I titled this sermon, “Loving the Material,” because, frankly, it's something I'm not very good at. And, at the same time, I want to explain to you how the material, especially connecting it to the energy, emotion, and patterns behind it, is the most healing and transformative approach that I take in my work.

Routinely, when I give a sermon, I cite Julian of Norwich, who talks about seeing God in everything. Her viewpoint as a fourteenth-century mystic informs much of my spiritual talks. Today, I added the quote from Francis Weller, a self-described psychotherapist, writer, and soul activist, who invites us to “fulfill a covenant with the soul” by honoring our grief. I'd like to expand out from this idea to include grieving what was or what could have been after a traumatic event.

When I tell people that I do trauma-informed diversity, equity, inclusion, antiracism, and feminist work – DEI gets a lot of names and letters—often the first thing that comes to mind is that I'm teaching people how not to trigger anyone. The environments I work in, especially universities, are so used to the idea that we can get along and do better by knowing the right answer and by never saying the wrong thing, that usually this mentality is what pops into their mind when I say trauma-informed.

That's not what I'm doing at all. Here's what I am doing: I'm suggesting that making space for the pain is fulfilling a covenant with the soul. It's uncomfortable. It's big work. It's also not ours alone to carry. And it's the most beautifully transformative thing that I've ever witnessed.

There are plenty of books out there by neuroscientists and psychologists. People who study the brain and PTSD and triggers and glimmers and tragic stories and stories of

recovery. I only wish to share a few basic ideas with you today, and I'm going to do so through story. My point is that you don't need to be anything other than who you are to be a healing presence. In fact, that might be the whole point of life. And I want to suggest to you that what you are healing is, first and foremost, yourself. And, by extension, everyone else connected to you.

We often tell what I call the "pasta story" to our clients. Imagine that you're ten years old. Your parents take you out to a pasta dinner to tell you that they are getting divorced. The conversation is devastating. And, from that point on, you feel like throwing up every time you even think of pasta. That's what an overwhelming event does. It gets things wired inappropriately in our brain. We focus on something we can control until we get to a place where we can process the emotions—and often we need help in that digestion. The walls we build up, fortunately or unfortunately, don't hold. I joke that eventually this person grows up, falls in love with a pasta chef, gets sent on regular business trips to Italy, and gets a great deal on a house next to a famous spaghetti restaurant. Literally, the energy that it takes to push something out of our mind eventually dwindles. There is no way out but through.

To this extent, when we think about the material, physical nature of our experience, it's very clear that the pasta was never the problem in the first place, but it is the material issue most affecting our life. It's the trigger; it's the signpost showing us where the unprocessed emotion is. This is what I mean by connecting the material and the pattern, the physical and the idea, the solid and the ephemeral.

When I'm doing my work, most people are coming to me with pasta stories. "Can you believe this coworker who said this?" Or, they say, "I have to work with this policy, which is completely unjust." Or, they say, "my employees keep telling me they don't feel valued." Sometimes, admittedly, I get a little bored by the material. It keeps us stuck. If I thought my job was fixing policies or blaming the right person or telling someone the precise thing they don't know, it would be exhausting and I'd feel like I was playing whack-a-mole. I also wouldn't be very effective.

But I also know that, on a deep level, you can't resolve fear with fear. Only love and deep compassion transform our experience. So, I choose to love the material. It's the door in.

The material, however, is hard. That's where the fear is. It's where we get hurt, where we experience loss, where we literally or figuratively, bang our head against a wall. The only thing, from a very Buddhist or Serenity Prayer kind of space, that we can do is be with the grief of *not* being able to change things. This allows us to focus on what we can change – which is our own experience. There are two phrases from the Biblical quotes that we read that support this: the desire to have a wise and discerning mind and to live and walk in the way of insight. And, to do this, we have to see ourselves.

There's one more part about trauma healing that I use regularly—and that's the practice of witnessing. I, on a personal level, am on a journey of learning to witness my experience, using the practice of what we call metacognition to bring awareness to my life experiences. I teach others to do this, mostly by doing it myself, and I go very wide – outside of time – when I do.

So, I want to invite you to imagine, on a zoomed out level, that this wall—demonstrated by the decision to simply avoid pasta for an entire lifetime – is also something that we have routinely built on a collective level. And, the energy to keep that wall up runs out. The desire for connection, for resolution, for healing, is so strong that it encourages resolution in rather miraculous ways across time.

Let me tell you a story about a professor who was in one of the workshops I held last summer in Iceland. His name was Richard. He's a pastor and a professor at a small religious school. One of the courses that he teaches is Introduction to World Religions. As part of the class, he takes students to visit religious centers from a variety of faith traditions. In our workshop, he told everyone a story about a field trip to a Hindu Temple with his college students. The students were getting off the bus—all except for one young woman. She froze. She refused to get off the bus, feeling sure that God would not appreciate it if she attended a non-Christian religious service.

Richard is a professor and a pastor. If he had behaved like many of my professor friends and clients, he might have told her: "Look, this is for a class. We arranged this trip. It's 20 percent of your final grade. Other religions aren't bad things." Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera ... There are tons of intellectual pieces of information that he might have shared with her to try to change the outcome. Yet, beautifully, his pastor training kicked in instead, which allowed him to respond in what I would call a trauma-informed way. Just like I could never recite the ingredients on the side of a pasta box to prove to someone that feeling nausea wasn't necessary, there were no bits of information that he could share with this woman in the moment that would change her experience through rational thought. He ended up sending his assistant in with the class and he sat with the student on the bus.

Though it might be angering to think that someone could have such prejudice as to think that God prefers one religion over another, that's simply the belief that's causing the real-life material situation of the frozen student on the bus. It's not true. And it won't go away with force. The truth, which I think we all know on a deep level, is that there's nothing we can do at all to be separate from the deep, divine love that we are. This student had not experienced that feeling before. The pastor, on some small scale, provided it to her by staying with her.

But, there's more to the story. As Richard shared his story, I knew that it was a Hindu Temple because as he spoke, a memory of me having attended a Hindu service as an undergraduate popped into my mind. I was taking a course in Hinduism at UNC and students were invited to attend a service as part of our final project. At first, I sat back, not wanting to be the awkward white lady who messed everything up, but, much like my first experience here at Calvary, I wasn't allowed to stay in the back. I was invited to be with the group, moving, dancing, and circulating with them.

Secondly, Richard isn't just any pastor, he's an AME (African Methodist Episcopal) pastor – trained in a religious tradition that arose precisely from rejection. It was in this city in 1787 that Black people were excluded from a Methodist worship service, leading to the formation of Mother Bethel AME Church in 1794. Richard, through his own healing and connection to the divine, was asked, over 200 years later, to sit with and, indeed,

to love someone who felt that they needed to reject others to maintain their relationship to the divine. His ability to stay with her in that one tiny moment was resolution on an historic level. I first shared this story in a virtual inclusive leaders group from my home office, on Sixth Street in Philadelphia, just a couple miles straight down the same street from Mother Bethel.

One of the other things that trauma – grief, overwhelm, discrimination – does is that it removes us from a feeling of connection to the whole. We heal when we restore the feeling that we are not alone. This can happen on a small level, like working through our grief over our parents' divorce so that we can stay in closer relationship with the love of our life, a pasta chef.

But it also goes so much deeper. Now, you have heard a story told by me in this Methodist church in Philadelphia in 2024. My personal experiences include rejection and welcoming – welcoming in a Hindu Temple, in a Methodist Church, and in an AME Church, where my husband grew up; and welcoming as a facilitator in Iceland, where a story of Sixth Street returned to me to be shared. None of it is about me, though, except that it is.

The collective seeks resolution, a return to love, to hope, and to the divine spark in us all, in the same way that we do as individuals. We are fractals and mirrors of the whole. This work happens well beyond our individual experience, often well beyond our ability to understand it ourselves. Yet, when we witness it, we experience the connection – and that is the divine.