

October 22, 2017
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Life Beyond Despair: Together”
The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine



Pastoral Prayer
The Reverend Melanie Marsh Baum

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Genesis 2:15–25

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." ¹⁸Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." ¹⁹So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." ²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Acts 16:24–34

²⁴Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. ²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

“Life Beyond Despair: Together”
Genesis 2:15–25, Acts 16:24–34

For the last ten years, I have spent a few days after Easter with three colleagues who are Presbyterian pastors. During our time together we talk about the work we’re doing, we offer feedback and encouragement, we share good food and the beautiful scenery of Montreat, North Carolina. Each year, we also meet with a Presbyterian pastor – usually someone further along in their career than we are – and ask for their advice on any number of topics. Last year, we meet with a former pastor named Fe Avis who talked to us about Soul Shop, an organization he founded to equip faith leaders and congregations to minister to those in their midst suffering from a sense of desperation, especially when that desperation is so profound that it leads them to contemplate suicide.

We met with Fe in a book store in Asheville. We got coffee and found a corner of the store where we could sit and talk. I was expecting that we would just ask Fe some questions about his work and his ministry, which is how these conversations usually go, but Fe had something else in mind. He had come prepared with questions for us, and the first one he asked was this: can you think of a time in your life when you felt a sense of desperation to the point where you contemplated suicide? One by one, we took turns answering that question. And in our group of four 40-something pastors, three out of four of us could name a time in our lives when we had experienced this level of desperation.

The research confirms that our small group is consistent with society at large. Research shows that eighty per cent of adults will seriously consider suicide at some point in their lives. The research also shows that identifying with a particular religion has no protective effect; there is no difference in suicide rates across denominational lines. What does have a slightly protective effect is not just identifying with a religion, but being an active participant in a faith community.¹

When Paul and Silas end up unjustly imprisoned in Philippi, secured in the innermost cell and with their feet in stocks, you might think they would succumb to despair. But they did not. Together, they sang hymns and said prayers and when an earthquake shook the prison so violently that all the prisoners were freed from their chains and the doors to the prison open, Paul

¹ http://www.asecondday.com/soulshop/masters/Suicide_Hope_and%20Love%20for_Faith_Communities

and Silas did not immediately escape. The person in this story who despairs is the jailer. After the earthquake, he wakes up to find the jail no longer intact – doors open and chains broken – and he is horrified. Even if a natural disaster is to blame, he is the one who will lose his job and, worse, his honor, if the prisoners escape on his watch. He is the only jailer on duty. There is no one who can attest that it was the earthquake, not a corrupt or inept jailer, that set these prisoners free. With no one to corroborate his story, the jailer concludes that the only option is to end his life. And so he pulls out his sword and gets ready to do just that. But he is not as alone as he feels. Before he can make another move, Paul shouts out: “Do not harm yourself. *We are all here.*” *We are all here.* That’s what Paul says to the jailer to stop him from harming himself. Just this: “*We are all here.*”

Dan Savage is a well-known columnist, journalist, and newspaper editor. Back in 2010, in response to a rash of teen suicides traced to the bullying of youth who were gay or perceived to be gay, Dan and his husband, Terry, sat down together and recorded a video. In it they shared their experiences with bullying during adolescence and how things changed as they got older and then after they met each other. When they made this video, they had been married for five years and together were raising an adopted son. The point they wanted to get across to these teenagers who were being harassed is that life does get better and that they should stick around to see for themselves just how much better it could be. When Dan and Terry put their video on the web it went viral. Within just a few weeks, thousands of other videos were posted, all with the same message of hope: “It gets better.”² What was so powerful about that project wasn’t just the message that “It gets better.” It was the number of people in the LGBTQ community who were willing to speak out publicly, which also sent the message to thousands of struggling teenagers that *they were not alone*. *Do not despair. We are all here.*

Just last week a similar kind of campaign exploded through social media when the actress Alyssa Milano used her Twitter account to encourage women who had been sexually harassed or assaulted to reply with the words “Me too.” Within the first twenty-four hours after she posted that message, the hashtag “me too” had been tweeted nearly half a million times – and that was just on Twitter.³ On other platforms, feeds filled up with women and men posting about their experiences or just writing those two simple words: *Me too*. By the

² <http://www.npr.org/2011/03/23/134628750/dan-savage-for-gay-teens-life-gets-better>

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/10/the-movement-of-metoo/542979/>

end of the week, there were more than 12 million posts with this hashtag. To see the sheer volume of women and men in our society who have had these experiences, and to discover that they include our friends and family and classmates and fellow church members – it gives all of us a deeper understanding of the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault in our society. To write those words is also a way for us to communicate to someone feeling a terrible sense of isolation because of what they have suffered, “Do not despair. *We are all here.*”

Earlier, Gillian read to us from Genesis chapter two, the second of two creation accounts in the Bible. In my experience, this is not the creation story that we tend to focus on, because it can be difficult for us, at a time of heightened awareness of the destructiveness of gender stereotypes, to imagine God creating women simply as a companion for men. But if we can let go of such a literal reading of the story, it has a much deeper and profoundly important message. It imagines how it might have gone had God created just one human being. After creating this one human being, God observes this marvel and, for the first and only time in the account of creation, God realizes and declares that God has done something that is not good. *Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.’* And so God makes creature after extraordinary creature to keep this human being company, but in spite of all these attempts, that one human being remained miserably, desperately, *lonely*. Finally, God makes a second human being out of the same stuff as the first. And that turns out to be just what is needed.

This is not a story about gender, and it is certainly not a story about the superiority of one gender over another. It is also not a story about why marriage is limited to a man and a woman. This is a story about the degree to which we human beings, beloved children of God, made in God’s own image, *need one another*. It is a story about why it can be life-threatening for us to feel isolated and alone.

You may have read this week that the “Me Too” movement is not new. The first person to use the words “me too” as a way to normalize and publicize sexual assault was Tarana Burke. Burke founded the “Me Too” movement in 2006. She was working with an organization in Alabama that ran a youth camp. A thirteen-year-old girl who attended the camp – Burke refers to her as Heaven – was clearly troubled. One day, Heaven came to Burke and began to tell her

about the sexual violence she had suffered. But Burke did not know how to respond, and so she sent Heaven to talk to someone else. Instead, Heaven left the camp and never came back. In her guilt, Burke kept imagining how she could have handled the conversation differently, and one question kept coming to her: “why didn’t I just say, *me too?*”⁴

There are few things in life that cause us a greater sense of despair than the feeling that we are alone, that our experience is unique, that no one else could possibly understand the depth of our pain or sorrow. And there are few things more powerful than for us to draw alongside someone who is suffering and remind them that they are not alone. *Do not despair. We are all here.*

The second creation account in Genesis also reminds us that being made in God’s image means that God created us to live not in isolation, but in community. God calls us into communities that we might learn to recognize the image of God in the many and diverse people we encounter – in our families, our schools, our neighborhoods, our workplaces, and here in church.

We might think – or wish – that church is a place we can gather with like-minded people bound together by shared religious beliefs. While there may be some truth to this, when we read the book of Acts we are reminded that from the beginning, the church has existed to bring together people of all different kinds – people of different ethnicities and cultures and education and social status and political persuasion. What brings us together and binds us together is the most fundamental and important thing about each of us: we are made in the image of God and transformed by God’s love revealed in Jesus.

Last August, we hosted a lecture by the Christian physician Dr. Willie Parker, who currently works as an abortion provider in the deep South. If you weren’t here, I highly recommend that you go to our website or our podcast and listen to what he had to say because his voice and perspective is a profound and much-needed addition to this conversation. During his talk, Dr. Parker shared that the work he does did not require him to set aside his deeply held religious convictions. Instead, his work requires him to mine those convictions to better understand the theological concept of shared humanity. He identified four primary identities that define him: he is heterosexual, black, male, and Christian. But, he said, “I’m never going to be more heterosexual, black, male

⁴ http://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2017/10/cleveland_rape_crisis_center_g_1.html

and Christian than I am human.”⁵ His work has taught him that what defines us all is our *humanity*, and it is this same humanity that connects us and enables us to say to any one of our fellow human beings: *Do not despair. We are all here.*

The apostle Paul could say this even to his jailer because Paul had learned that God cares more about our shared humanity than about any other traits that distinguish us from one another. And for the jailer, Paul’s words and Paul’s actions save his life, and then they change his life. They reveal to him something so profound that he and his family are baptized, claiming their place in this new family of God.

The Bible and our lives teach us that every single one of us will know despair. For some, it will be a passing emotion; for others, a life-long affliction. Fortunately, we live in a time where greater awareness and acknowledgement of mental health issues means that treatments are available that can save lives. But as a community of believers, as those who are bound together by our shared humanity and our conviction that God’s love is for all, we are also called to see when one among us is suffering; and to reveal God’s love by offering some potentially life-saving, profoundly comforting words, *“God is here. We are here. You are not alone.”*

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer
The Reverend Melanie Marsh Baum

Precious Lord, take our hands. Lead us on. Help us stand. For you know that we are tired and weak and worn, because we are a people who want the world’s groaning to stop. We would like to shut our eyes to the news and close our ears to the clamoring. But we can’t. And we know that you never shut your eyes or close your ears or turn your back on us. Never. And so, once again, we thank you with words that are so inadequate, because your love is so big, and your mercy is so wide, and your passion is so deep, and we are the recipients.

Help us to see the good news in this world that does exist—the deeds done that make you smile; the love exchanged that makes you dance; the hard conversations that ensue, carrying your people to a better place; the long arc of history that really does point toward justice.

⁵ <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/church-covenant-sermons-music/id994280606?mt=2> Dr. Parker’s lecture is “A Life’s Work: A Moral Argument for Choice.” He has also written a book by the same name.

Help us to hear the song of your creation in the cold, crisp air, the message of truth beneath another person's complaint, and hear and receive the words of affirmation that we sometimes miss in the din of our busy lives. Help us to know how to heal our divisions and to talk with honesty and to hear with understanding and to act as people confident in your love, not only for us, but for all of your people.

Heal the divisions that exist in our world and in our families, animosities that won't let go. Raise up leaders whose voices stir us to good action, increased love, and abiding respect.

Great God, surround our children, no matter what their age, with courage, fueled by what they know of you, to face and tackle this world's challenges. Surround all those who suffer pain, grief, fear or loneliness, that they might know your presence and be comforted. We especially pray for Judy, Andrew, Akeya, Rich, Thelma Everhart, Gabe, Eliseo, Anne Marie, Greg, Elizabeth, Patrick, Olitana, Robert, Tom, Rory, Liam, Doug, and for those who are struggling with illness, convalescing, or are homebound; the patients, family, and staff in our surrounding hospitals; and those who have placed prayer requests in our Carpenter's Box. Walk beside all those who work to heal others, in our neighboring medical institutions and beyond.

Precious Lord, take our hands, linger near, and hear our prayers, as we pray the same prayer you prayed with those first disciples, Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.