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Ripples of Healing from Mark 1:29-39
Fifth Sunday After Epiphany

Will you pray with me this morning, Plymouth? May the words of my mouth (as fully inadequate as they will be) and the meditations and prayers of all of our hearts (as speechless as we are) be good in your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there prayed.” Mark Chapter 1, Verse 35 is a moment of absolute stillness, silence, and deep loneliness in the middle of a chapter (a passage of Scripture) filled to the brim with over-activity: healings, expelling of demons, travel, and crowds of endless pressing need. This morning, friends, we are really living in a still very dark morning at the deserted place—and it is exactly where we need to be. It is okay.

Today was scheduled to be Jane Anne’s monthly Sunday to preach. I know that, like myself, Jane Anne treasures the opportunities she has to come before you in this pulpit and share a Word of Gospel and grace. All of the words this week of common prayer: The Call to Worship, our hymn selections, the Unison Prayers, and even the sermon title, “Ripples of Healing,” come from my colleague, The Rev. Jane Anne Ferguson. She finalized this worship bulletin only hours before indescribable tragedy would touch the Ferguson-Chorpenning household.

The loss of a child at any age and for any reason is a source of grief and pain that stays with a parent in some form or another for a lifetime—with a brother, with a stepfather, with stepbrothers. Our work, brothers and sisters/ siblings in Christ, here in this congregation in the days, weeks, years to come is to allow the work of the Holy Spirit through grief and bereavement to flow through us—to be ripples rather than waves of healing. Ripples rather than waves because it requires patience, boundaries, awareness, and finesse.

Jane Anne’s original sermon title, which I retained, could not be a more accurate depiction of the way grief and loss process works. I know this from my time as both a hospice and hospital chaplain. Starting from a sudden and unexpected impact on the surface of the waters of life, the process of recovering equilibrium does not come in waves but rather ripples of healing. Continuing with the image of the ripple, we should also remember that ripples continue to exist in the system of the water well after they are no longer visible to the human eye.

This will be a long process for both Jane Anne and Hal—one that they will both define in their own way. We will need to wait for them to define their needs. So far, as a congregation, I want to commend you all for understanding the boundaries of space needed. You all have responded with so much love and care, and I know that they feel the ripples of healing your prayers are sending. Likewise, I want to thank the Leadership

Council for providing meals for the family. We will let the congregation know if more are needed.

I also understand and need to name that for many of you, some have spoken with me and some haven't and maybe won't, the ripples of your own healing processes intersect and overlap (magnified) with the ripples of this event. Hal shared with us, **vulnerably** and authentically, by email that Colin probably took his own life. While brave and hard to say, it helps remove stigma and bring this conversation to the light.

I know that for many of you, this has brought-up your own grief, fears, loss, **guilt**, and feelings of helplessness even decades old. The ripples of this event in our church family system have brought-up a lot of things for many of you from your own families and histories. **I want you to know that even as busy as I will be perceived to be “holding down the fort” in the coming weeks, your pastoral care, the conversations you need to have, the questions this might raise about God always come first for me, for Mark, for Mandy, and our team of pastorally trained lay people.** I want to be as explicit as I possible can be (no vagaries today): do not hesitate to reach out if you need to talk, or process, or grieve. This is true even if the triggering event is 50 or 75 years ago or even happened in your family system a 100 years or more ago. The ripples of healing are a promise from God, we see God's great power of healing in this passage, but that doesn't mean that you have to do it alone or that it is easy. This brings me back to our Scripture (good news) even this dark morning:

“In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”

The word translated from Greek here in our translation as “a deserted place” is hotly contested in different Christian translations. Other words frequently used in lieu of deserted include: secluded place, solitary place, desolate place, uninhabited, or most interestingly it can be translated as a vulnerable place... a place that is deprived of the protection of others—the rawness, realness, and pain of the human experience. In the early hours of a new day, when it was still very dark and dangerous, Jesus got up and went out alone to a place of vulnerability and there he prayed.”

One of my favorite theology books is called *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*. In this book, the author and father of son living with disability, Dr. Thomas Reynolds, argues that good theology starts with looking for the places in the Bible and in Systematic Theologies where strength comes from brokenness, wholeness comes from authenticity, where community/ church/ all of this Christianity business really is rooted in one word: Vulnerability.

This is entirely counter-cultural and is essential for understanding what a grief process, ripples of healing, means for us now. Christianity is not a normal religion or normal way of living where safety and comfort are the arguable norms. Normal life is life where we suppress pain. In normal life we ignore healing. In normal life we rush bereavement. In normal life, strength is the ultimate virtue, right? In fact, in this book, and I love this and

reference it frequently because it is at the core of my belief in Christ, is that **normal is a cult**. The Cult of Normalcy dictates that we always need to be strong, always need to be progressing, always need to have it all figured out, always need to “get over it fast,” always look happy, healthy, and wise. This normal business isn’t Christian...heck it isn’t even possible. It is a false idol. The Cult of Normalcy.

Vulnerability, deserted places, lonely and hard are the source of our faith in a God who accompanied and accompanies all of humanity in the hard parts of life and death. **God and Jesus Christ don’t end when things get hard**, when we need to be vulnerable with each other, when healing doesn’t even seem remotely possible, but that is where faith starts.

In the early hours of a new day, when it was still very dark and dangerous, Jesus got up and went out alone to a place of vulnerability **and there prayed.**”

A couple of closing remarks: I want us to look to the last three words of this fascinating verse: “And There Prayed.” What Hal and Jane Anne shared in vulnerability with you by email, what many of you have since shared with me, what we do by worshipping God (mystery, universe, creator) together, sharing in admitting our own brokenness, admitting that none of us looks anything like normal (AMEN!) is **dangerous, risky, and vulnerable**.

It is, yes, all of these things, but it is never hopeless. In denying the power of normal and embracing the rawness and realness of vulnerability and finally turning to the source of life in prayer (even in the midst of the darkest morning in the scariest places of our souls)—we find hope eternal in a God who will not let us go, a God who accompanied humanity even unto worst. This is the importance of the cross even for progressive churches to understand. God accompanies humanity in even the worst circumstances.

While vulnerable in a deserted and lonely place, Jesus was far from alone. And there he prayed. Sometimes, like now, that is all we can do. Grounded in a calling to vulnerable places and spaces of life and death, we together come before God in prayer. There is no normal way to grieve a loss like the loss of a child, but we can come alongside in prayer, in knowing our own vulnerability is a gift that starts the ripples of healing from a core of hope.

Deserted (vulnerable) places have no map, no normal, no yelp, no timeline, no Google to tell you how to find them or exactly how long you will need to be there. They just are and need to be. Amen