

Troubled Waters

John 5:1-9 (King James Version)

I am sure that many of you are old enough to recognize the familiar strains of *Bridge Over Troubled Waters* which Phil just played. Even if you don't recall the original version sung back in the '70's by Art Garfunkel, you've heard its refrain from singers as varied as Elvis Presley and Aretha Franklin. Its composer, Paul Simon, admitted that inspiration for it was drawn from an old gospel hymn with its line "I'll be your bridge over deep water, if you trust my name." Simon never explicitly stated who the *bridge* in his song was, but if we look at the lyrics with its promises of faithfulness we can picture an really good earthly friend, a really good friend or partner or lover who's got your back, who gets you through tough times. Or, or, if we listen with believer's hearts and ears, maybe it is someone elseSomeone who promises to

*Dry your tears, lay himself down for you, offer comfort,
ease your mind.....*

You know those lyrics, don't you? And those of us familiar with Scripture could add a couple of lines to Simon's original version, lines like.....

I will still the storm and calm the agitated waves,

Yes, there are several wonderful stories where Someone else, God in Jesus Christ, does exactly that – rebukes the wind and quiets the troubled waters. Very comforting, reassuring stories.

But in today's lesson, incorporated into the narrative or footnoted, God does exactly the opposite. God sends an angel to *trouble the water*. Or to *stir it up* as our pew Bibles read which is a much more benign way of putting it. *Trouble the water*. Can you envision what is happening there in that pool, *from time to time when the season is right*? That normally smooth little body of water, bubbling up quite vigorously, maybe frothing, creating little waves, disturbing the normally peaceful surface of the water. Rough, not smooth. A bit unsettling, to say the least, if not downright intimidating and frightening. Picture it. Troubled waters. It feels a lot like life right now, doesn't it? We're troubled on several levels.

Regardless of any political stances, I think we can all agree that we are a troubled country in a troubled world. "Who are we?" we ask ourselves. We've lost our sense of identity – are we a light to the nations, the salt of the earth? Are we peacemakers or harbingers of war, threatening "total destruction" to our enemies? Do we welcome the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee, "the

tired, the poor, the huddled masses”? If so, how can we do that in a fair and just way? We don’t agree on who needs medical coverage and tax relief. Lines are hardening across the board. “Our social fabric is frayed” is one poignant description of the current state of affairs in our country. We are divided against one another on so many issues. We have become judgmental and accusative, mean-spirited, hard-hearted and tight-fisted, if not even aggressive and violent. Hate crimes are up, opioid use is exploding, children and young people are overly anxious, older folks are depressed. Who leads the way? Who speaks for us? We are in troubled waters as a nation.

And here at FCC. Soon in Pilgrim Hall we’re going to hear a report from a committee of the Consociation which has committed to helping us look at ourselves as we now exist. I can’t thank the staff and the volunteers of our sister churches enough for the great labor of love and support that they have given us in listening to us and preparing this report. But, though I have not seen it in full, I think that for many of us the report and its recommendations will be sobering and troubling. It will lift up things we’ve been seeing or not seeing, dynamics that concern us, many hopes and expectations that are not being met in spite of our best efforts and intentions. It will summarize ways that we need to grow and deepen and reconfigure – and deal with tensions or laments arising from both internal and external realities which have brought us to the place we now find ourselves. I imagine it will contain some joys and good news, but it will reflect some sadnesses and griefs, some facts which we all know but are hard to face. There has been considerable turbulence around here in the past years. Transitions are hard, and for sure our church has been, and is, living in some troubled waters, but looking deeply into these waters, being honest and thoughtful about them, can bring us to a better place, to new life, to new visions. I believe this! In fact, I am counting on it!

And how about your soul? What is the state of your soul? Are there disquieted and disquieting places within you? A need for forgiveness? A person you need to forgive, or is it you who needs forgiveness from someone else, or maybe even from yourself? Is there an ingrained habit that is counter-productive and causes you, and others, pain? A secret sin, a deep wound, too distressing to acknowledge even to yourself? Does your need to be right get in the way of important relationships? Are you addicted – perhaps to an unhealthy substance which is bad enough, it’s terrible. – or maybe worse, are you addicted to getting “high” in the wrong ways – being praised, accumulating more and more, being so envious that you can’t appreciate what you do have. What is swirling around in your life beneath the surface that is limiting you, making you unhealthy?

Not fun to look within ourselves to see the shadows and the darkness, to confront the troubling angel. But after all, what's the point of going down into the agitated water? Isn't it to be made whole? To be made well. To be healed of your paralysis. Think again of the promise of our text:

Whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in

was made whole of whatsoever disease he or she had.

Stand up, take your mat and walk, Jesus said, [and] at once

the man was made well.

We don't face the troubled waters of America, our church, our souls, in order to be overwhelmed, to sink, to be made worse, or to drown. We acknowledge the truth of the state of affairs in order to emerge from them to be made whole! To be made whole!

God is gracious and compassionate to be sure, but God's grace does not come easily. It is not "cheap" as Dietrich Bonhoeffer would say. Some have even called it a "severe grace". *Severe*. Why should an angel, a messenger from God, mess up that nice pleasant pool – such a welcome thing in the midst of a hot dusty desert climate? Why do we have to step down into our own troubled depths in order to emerge? Why must we confront the turbulent waters in our lives in order to move on to wholeness and health?

In these days we are being offered a severe grace. We are called to separate from the old, to die in order to be born. If we open ourselves to this severe grace, we encounter God in a new process, in the cyclone, in the dark, in the crises that shatter our old confining consciousness. We are made new. (Sue Monk Kidd in *Firstlight p. 140*). We can pick up our mat and walk out of the troubled waters. Walk forth as a nation, as a church, as individuals precious in God's sight.

And how shall we prepare ourselves to walk in this redeemed, refreshed, re-directed way? How can our wounds be the beginning of our healing? The source of being made whole?

An old Jewish legend suggests part of an answer:

A rabbi asks the prophet Elijah, "When will the Messiah come and where will we find him?" Elijah answered, "You will find him at the gates of the city sitting among the poor covered with wounds." "But how will I recognize him since there are so many sitting there?"

Elijah answered, “True, there are many there who unbind all their wounds at the same time and then bind them up again. But the one you are seeking unbinds only one wound at a time and binds it up again, saying to himself, ‘Perhaps I shall be needed: if so, I must always be ready so as not to delay for a moment’”.

Shall we, can we, look at our wounds, slowly, deliberately, with kindness and tenderness, recognizing the pain they generate. Can we, give them air, and care, to encourage mending, and then bind them up again, one at a time, until full healing can take place? Can we do this, patiently, hopefully, expectantly, and never for a moment, render ourselves unfit for service and presence and contribution if needed, as will be needed...is needed for our nation’s redemption from fractiousness and fearfulness, for a full life for our souls, and for our church’s sake.

I believe we can. I do! If we trust the One who guides us through barren land or troubled waters into newness of life, if we recognize the true bridge who leads to us to wholeness and wellness, the one who says *like a bridge over troubled waters I will lay me down*.

And please notice that, like our paralyzed friend at the pool, healing comes only for those who want it, who ask for it, who put themselves in a place where being made whole can happen. God is eager to meet us in the present and offer us, indeed help us secure an open future. Each moment is pregnant with the possibility of receiving God’s grace, repenting of things we’ve done or were done to us or left undone, returning to right relationship with God and those around us, and receiving the future as open rather than determined. (David Lose)

But we have to want it and ask for God’s help in these efforts.

So we pray and sing, *Guide us, O Thou Great Jehovah, lead us safe on Canaan’s side*. May it be so. Amen and amen.

Sermon preached by Susan Power Trucksess, First Congregational Church in Branford, 15 October 2017

Insights and citations from:

Sue Monk Kidd’s *Firstlight* (New York: Guidepost Books, 2006).

David Lose’s blog *In the Meantime*, Sept. 27, 2017.