

“Healing Work”
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Philippians 4:4-9

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
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During his second term as US Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy called attention to a series of public health concerns that weren't those one typically thought of. He addressed workplace mental health and well-being, parental stress, adolescent mental health as it relates to social media use, and a nation-wide epidemic of loneliness.

Dr. Murthy invited us all to think about health and well-being more broadly than infectious disease or chronic physical illness. To think instead about mental, emotional, and relational aspects of life and how those impacted our own health and the health of the wider communities of which we are a part.

I appreciated reading these various reports as they were released. Partly because they were relevant personally, as a parent of a young child and as someone with a job that can be stressful.

I also appreciated these studies as a pastor, for I felt that churches had an important role to play in addressing these concerns, especially the epidemic of loneliness. We needed to be very intentional about cultivating opportunities for people to connect with each other, to develop intergenerational relationships, to experience belonging.

These concerns around adolescent mental health, workplace well-being, parental stress, and the epidemic of loneliness have shaped my approaches to pastoral care and congregational life the last few years. And they are central to my vision for the church, a vision that I've repeated often from this pulpit—to cultivate a resilient community of care and belonging in these difficult times we are living through, in order to bear witness to and embody our spiritual and humane values for the good of the wider world.

Churches, then, play an important role in the health and well-being of our congregants and constituents. Helping people gain awareness of health concerns, develop knowledge and skills, and make healthy connections, all become part of the good work of the church.

Today we are also highlighting some of the good work of this church. Over the last 25 years House of Hope, through the Houses of Hope Fund, has contributed over \$3 million to address housing needs in our community. In the Assembly Room we've got displays showing all the buildings we've built and contributed to in that time and how they've impacted this city. I'm grateful to our Communications coordinator Johan Wyckoff who designed those.

On one of the coldest days this winter, Johan, Debby Fulton, and I attended the groundbreaking for yet another housing unit we are supporting. Women's Advocates was breaking ground on the remodel of two buildings they had purchased that were going to become shelters. One of the units will be the first shelter in Minnesota devoted especially to members of the Trans community.

This is good, healing work. Visionary, faithful, and effective. I hope you'll join us in the Assembly Room today as we celebrate this milestone.

We are in the Christian season of Lent, those forty days of examination and preparation for Holy Week and Easter.

And for Lent this year, I've invited us into an examination of our humanity and what we need in order to flourish. And what our wider communities and other people also need for their flourishing.

For us and others to flourish, there is good, individual work for each of us to do, and work that we must do collectively together.

I've been guided by the insights of the sociologist Amanda Udis-Kessler and her book *Abundant Lives*. In that book, she discusses three aspects of our individual work—cultivating the virtues, healing our psychic wounds, and growing in our faith and spiritual practice. Two weeks ago we examined

cultivating virtues, particularly humility, compassion, generosity, and courage. This week we are concerned about the healing work we must do, primarily our emotional and mental health and well-being.

Udis-Kessler points out that even if we are doing the good work of cultivating moral virtues like humility and compassion, often what gets in the way of us being virtuous is that “our best opportunities to practice [the virtues] often come at the worst possible times.” She elaborates, “When we are anxious, ashamed, overwhelmed, or otherwise caught up in discomfort” is often when we need to muster the ability to respond to a situation with moral virtue. And that’s not easy.

So, even when we are committed to our moral growth, we are only going to achieve that if we are committed to our personal growth more broadly, including our psychological health and well-being. As she writes, our psychological growth “help[s] us become more resilient, flexible, and open-hearted, which is important for both our own flourishing and our support of the flourishing of others.”

We each have hurts that require healing. All of us have emotional pain. Grief, heartbreak, loneliness, and more. One of the key first steps in emotional healing is to simply pay attention to ourselves and how we are feeling. To be self-aware.

We also all need to be more emotionally literate. I like Brene Brown’s book *Atlas of the Heart*, which explores eighty different emotions—the nuances between them, how they connect to each other, and what the latest science says about each one.

One reason we all need to be more emotionally aware and literate is that generationally we weren’t socialized to be that way. Most folks my age and older weren’t taught to identify their emotions and to talk about them. Often, the exact opposite. We were told to suppress how we were feeling and to toughen up and keep going. Which means we often lack knowledge and language to understand how we are feeling and to express it.

One of my therapists once told me that most men only feel confident in feeling and expressing one emotion—anger. That talking about any other emotion was historically viewed as unmanly. And so men, who were often feeling something else—sadness, guilt, anxiety, overwhelm—often ended up expressing anger because that’s the only emotion they were socialized to feel.

I’ve been so pleased as a parent of a child over the last decade to watch as he has gained emotional intelligence. Teaching little kids to be aware of their feelings, how to pay attention to them, how to talk about them, what words to use, and even what are healthy responses is now a vital part of education. What a great development.

In Sebastian’s elementary school in Omaha, each classroom had a quiet corner where a child could go if they were feeling emotionally dysregulated. There would be a comfy place to sit, some blankets and stuffies to cuddle up with, and on the wall a chart displaying images for a variety of emotions so the child could identify which one’s they were feeling.

Kids have been helped by Pixar’s *Inside Out* movies. These films taught all of us about the core emotions and how each of them is important in order to have a whole and healthy self.

Kids are also being taught that this is about their brains and how their brains function. I was blown away when Sebastian, in his Kindergarten year, brought home an image of the human brain with all the various segments of the brain labeled with their names and functions. His school counselor was teaching the kids the various parts of the brain and which ones controlled emotions and reasoning and bodily functions. So that kids could gain better awareness of how even their emotional life is part of the functions of their body.

Adults are playing catch up. We weren’t taught these things in Kindergarten. So prioritizing our emotional awareness and intelligence might be a vital step for us in our own psychological healing and personal growth towards flourishing.

Also many of us have trauma to heal from. Trauma we’ve experienced in our own lives. And inherited traumas passed down in our families.

In recent years there's been much more social attention to trauma and how to provide trauma-informed care. The bestselling book *The Body Keeps the Score* was helpful for many of us in gaining a better understanding of trauma and how it impacts us, including our health and well-being.

Theologians and pastoral care specialists have also been writing about trauma-informed approaches to ministry. Serene Jones, who is the President of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, has a good book entitled *Trauma and Grace* in which she writes about, among other things, pastoral care with those who have experienced reproductive loss or working with a group of survivors of domestic violence. With that particular group, she led them in reading and discussing the Psalms together. I often give pastoral advice to read the Psalms, because in that book you will encounter every human emotion and most human experiences from deep hurt and wild rage to ecstatic joy.

Bible scholars have also helped us better understand that most of the scriptures are written by people who had lived through trauma. One of the best books on this topic is David Carr's *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins*. Slavery, exile, war, conquest, torture, sexual violence, military occupation, religious persecution, and crucifixion—these are all experienced in the central stories of the Bible. And it is the survivors of those experiences who have recorded these stories for us. Scripture can help us gain awareness of trauma, how it impacts our lives, and how our ancestors responded to it, in both good and bad ways.

Healing from trauma often requires professional guidance and assistance. And also a caring support system.

Addiction is another area of psychological hurt. Alcohol, drugs, gambling, sexual, even social media addictions can rob us of our health and well-being and our ability to flourish. They can destroy our relationships and our very sense of self. Addiction can rob us of our agency and mental capacity.

Addiction also harms friends and family. Often those of us who have loved or cared for a person dealing with addiction need to seek our own healing.

Twelve-step programs, support groups, treatment, and medical interventions are vital to healing from addiction.

Finally, there's our mental health. 1 in 5 adults experiences a mental illness each year and 1 in 6 youth. Some people live with chronic, lifelong mental illness. Most of us, though, over the course of our lifetimes, will experience seasons of mental illness, just as we experience seasons of physical illness and disability. Anxiety, depression, and complicated grief being among those most of us are likely to experience at some time in our lives.

Fortunately we have grown as a society and are more open to talking about mental illness, working against the stigma that for far too long prevented most people from seeking the treatments that they needed to heal.

We also benefit from brain science, which has given us better understanding and has improved pharmaceutical treatments for many.

Of course all of these psychological hurts—emotional pain, trauma, addiction, and mental illness—intersect with one another, often compounding each other.

For all of these hurts, therapy remains an important step. I believe all of us should see a therapist at some point in our lives. Because all of us have hurts we need help healing from.

I've got friends who refuse to date anyone who hasn't been to therapy. Which seems like a pretty healthy rule to me.

Here is how Amanda Udis-Kessler summarizes the good work of psychological healing that we Christians must do:

As we gain the ability to flourish, we become better able to attend to the well-being of others. We can give of ourselves more freely if we experience the peace and spaciousness that comes with

being able to meet our own emotional needs. We can tolerate the inevitable discomfort of living into Jesus's vision . . . if we understand our own relationship with discomfort and know how to let it flow through us without running from it or fighting it. It is easier to cultivate humility, compassion, courage, and generosity when we start from the deep truth of our own inherent worth—a deep truth so many of us need to relearn as a result of experiences that have harmed it.

Of course peace is what Paul wishes for the Philippians. And what, I believe, God desires for us.

If we are to experience the joy, gentleness, gratitude, lack of anxiety, belovedness, and excellence that Paul writes about in the passage we read today, then we must engage in the good hard work of healing our hurts.

Fortunately we are not alone. We belong to a resilient and caring community, ready to support us and be a part of that healing journey.

We are empowered by the Spirit of the Great God who created the universe and also cares for us as a nurturing parent. Ready to embrace us when we are hurting and always present, even when we are in pain. We can draw upon that love, and upon that support, and upon that power, to do the good work of healing.