

12th June 2022 – ‘Healing divisions

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC Sheku Kanneh-Mason, Plínio Fernandes: Scarborough Fair (Arr. Parkin)

<https://youtu.be/xQVgxzzEhG4>

WELCOME

Welcome to our service this morning. Welcome to you all, whether you are here in person or online today.

Opening words - Angela Herera

Don't leave your broken heart at the door;

Bring it to the altar of life.

Don't leave your anger behind;

it has high standards

and the world needs vision.

Bring them with you, and your joy

And your passion. Bring your loving,

And your courage and your conviction.

Bring your need for healing,

And your powers to heal.

There is work to do

And you have all that you need to do it right here in this room.

CHALICE LIGHTING

Let's begin by lighting our chalice candle, as is our custom, as a symbol of our free religious faith. And if you're at home, you might like to light a candle with me.

We are each different, yet we are all connected by what we share in common. May this flame be for the brilliant light of our uniqueness, and the all-embracing love of our divinity, burning brightly together, now and always.

June is Pride Month, a time to celebrate LGBTQIA+ people, who have often been marginalized and discriminated against, and at times sadly still are. And so it seemed important and appropriate to include the 'healing of divisions' in our Healing theme. Because divisions can arise between people of different sexualities and genders, between those of different races and skin colours, between people with different abilities and disabilities, between those from different classes and cultures. In fact any kind of difference can turn into a division if we let it. This service is about healing those divisions and celebrating our diversity.

1st HYMN 119 (P) O source of many cultures

O Source of many cultures,
of lives, beliefs and faith;
you brought us all together
to share one world in space.

Now show us how to honour
each vision of your way,
to live within the tension
of difference you display.

The colour and the culture,
that kept us both apart,
are gifts that we can offer,
a means for us to start

a journey with each other
till hand in hand we show,
through mutual understanding,
respect and love can grow.

PRAYER

Samuel Trumbore

Teach my heart healing words.
Show me the words that help rather than harm.
Instruct me in the verbs that bring energy,
the nouns pointing to the real,
the adjectives describing your subtleties.
Reveal to me how words can be offered
in a way that connects rather than separates,
that develops trust and not suspicion,
that opens the heart and relaxes the mind.
Amen.

Alternative Lord's Prayer, as shared by Rev Sue Woolley at yesterday's Western Union meeting in Taunton

Spirit of Life and Love, here and everywhere,
may we be aware of your presence in our lives.
May our world be blessed.
may our daily needs be met,
and may our shortcomings be forgiven,
as we forgive those of others.
Give us the strength to resist wrongdoing,
the inspiration and guidance to do right,
and the wisdom to know the difference.
We are your hands in the world; help us to grow.
May we have compassion for all living beings,
and receive whatever life brings
with courage and trust.
Amen

Our story this morning is a parable from the Gospel of John. It is the story of the man at the pool in Bethesda. This pool was believed to have healing powers, but only for whoever entered the pool first when the water had been 'stirred up'.

STORY: A Man Healed at the Pool of Bethesda, John 5: 2-8

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids —blind, lame, and paralysed.

One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?'

The sick man answered him, 'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.'

Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.'

At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

READING: Rabbi Rami Shapiro, from *Hasidic Tales Annotated & Explained*

'The feeling of being in exile from God is part of the human condition, but it is only a feeling, a perception – and a misperception at that. It arises from our misunderstanding of the nature of God and creation. We imagine that God is separate from creation in the way a potter is separate from her pots. But God is infinite and without boundaries, and hence incapable of being separate from, or other than, anything. God is everything; yet, given God's infinite creativity, everything that God is is unique. Just as no two waves are exactly alike and yet all waves are a manifestation of the ocean, so, too, no two human beings are alike, yet each is a manifestation of God.

Your sense of exile is not a punishment but a misreading of the gift of uniqueness. It is through you and your uniqueness that God manifests and experiences the vast diversity of life. This diversity need not be at the expense of a higher unity, however.

Unity and diversity are both givens. The challenge is to see the latter (diversity) as a manifestation of the former (unity). The answer to human diversity is not human uniformity;

we are not richer for being less creative. The answer to human diversity is to see that it is rooted in Divine Unity. Your very sense of exile comes from the One from Whom you cannot be in exile.

SILENCE

INTERLUDE Prelude in Eb major, JS Bach, performed by Sean Shibe

COMMENTARY

The parable of the man at the pool of Bethesda raises many questions. 38 years! That's very specific. How long had he actually been at the pool? Did he ever ask for help? If not, why not? Why did he stay when there seemed to be so little hope? And why would only the first person in the pool be healed anyway?! We don't know. But those questions are interesting because maybe, like me, you find you're already imagining yourself as the sick man. And maybe some of those questions resonate. When have I waited endlessly for things to get better? When have I not had the courage to ask for help? When should I have questioned the system rather than just lamely accepted it? For example.

But then, who knew – after all those years – something did change for the man, and it happened very swiftly and simply, or so it would seem. Another man, this one by the name of Jesus, according to the story, noticed him, and saw his predicament, and took the time to talk to him. Asked him a profound question – ‘Do you want to be made well?’ Do you want to be healed? It's a good question. The answer is not necessarily straightforward. I mean, what is this man going to do with his life after 38 years of being sick? It could be a terrifying prospect. And in fact he doesn't answer the question, but he does explain why he hasn't been able to reach the pool. ‘I didn't have anyone to put me in the pool’, he says.

And then Jesus, according to the story, does something interesting. He does not put the man in the pool. Instead he simply tells the man to get up and walk. And he does. Which is pretty miraculous, and you will have your own views about that. But actually I think miracles do happen when someone who's been sidelined, ignored, frustrated, helpless for a long time is

suddenly seen. And understood. And acknowledged and reached out to. And maybe the pool was no longer necessary. Perhaps the pool was a red herring – a distraction. What this man really needed was to be seen. He needed someone to believe in him. To see the worth in him, and the potential, and maybe that was enough.

If you have ever felt excluded, marginalized, or ignored, or worthless, or misunderstood, or invisible...and haven't we all felt those things some of the time...then you might be able to identify with the sick man and the lifeline he was thrown of simply being seen, and understood, valued and believed in.

My sense is that many of the divisions in our selves, in our families, in our communities, in our world could...just maybe...be healed in similar ways. By compassionate, creative attention. By connection.

It sounds easy – and in a way it is – but then again, we're complicated, aren't we?

So I'm trying to imagine now the other people at the pool. All of them also, presumably, desperate themselves to be the first one in, to get that one chance of healing. Needing to beat everyone else into the water, even prepared to trample over them on the way if necessary. Or maybe just simply not to notice them. Have you ever been that person? The one so intent on getting your own needs met you haven't noticed other people. I know I have.

I reckon Rabbi Rami Shapiro gets to the root of the human problem, the place from where all division springs. He writes: 'The feeling of being in exile from God is part of the human condition.' In other words, at some level, we all feel exiled – from God or the Universe. It's just a feeling, and a misperception at that. But nevertheless we *feel* it, at least some of the time. Our sense of self-worth and belonging, our belief in our own intrinsic value – they're all quite fragile really, are they not? Quite easily threatened and undermined. And though, as the Rabbi says, being exiled from God is impossible because we are an intrinsic part of the whole, the *feeling* is real, and it has consequences. Our innate fears and insecurities can lead us to behave selfishly, and defensively, even aggressively. They cause divisions.

So, for example, before same-sex marriage was made legal in the UK, there was a lot of debate about it, and there was significant resistance to the idea in some quarters, as you

may remember. And the arguments against were all wrapped up in different ways, but essentially I would say they were all about feeling threatened. There was fear. Fear that something was being taken away. If, say, I derive a sense of belonging and sanctification and approval by the state and by God by being able to get married, then I want to protect that privilege. If anyone can get married, then I won't get to feel so special any more. It was something like that, I think. Like being part of an exclusive club, which stops being exclusive if everyone's allowed in. Which comes from a feeling there's only so much approval to go around! There's only so much love to be had! And if you take some then there's less for me! Does that make sense?

It's nonsense, of course. Approval by God and the Universe doesn't have to be earned, it is freely given, and love is abundant. Belonging doesn't depend on other people not belonging. But it can certainly *feel* as though it does, and that feeling is powerful, and harmful.

I want to say that an important part of a spiritual life is to see that. Or rather to see through it. To really get it, that my happiness and your happiness don't depend on someone else's, or some other group's, or nation's, or culture's unhappiness – quite the reverse in fact. In spite of so much messaging to the contrary, here we teach that life is not a competition, not in matters of the spirit. And that's a seriously counter-cultural idea. It's radical. We say that we can all be healed, not just the first ones to get in the pool, or those who have a particular set of beliefs, or way of living. We say that no one should be left languishing on the sidelines. And no one need be.

Because there's more than enough love, more than enough light, more than enough healing for us all.

And it turns out the tools we need to heal our divisions are free! And available! They are about taking time, paying attention, noticing who is being excluded, understanding the boundaries that get in the way for people, and reaching out to them, making space for them. They include listening, taking an interest, curiosity. A willingness for conversation and dialogue. These are spiritual skills which we can all get better at, and they act as great 'levelers'. As Gav said yesterday, sometimes all it takes is to put a table in a room – and then we then begin to uncover the common ground we share – that we are all vulnerable, and all doing our best. Our differences make us gloriously unique. But the bottom line is that we're all manifestations of the One, of the Divine.

Jesus was a teacher, who led by example, who reached out, built bridges, and saw the potential in everyone. We can follow that example if we choose to. We can set that example ourselves. And then just see what miracles of healing might unfold.

Blessed be.

2nd HYMN: 195 (P) We sing a love

We sing a love that sets all people free,
that blows like wind that burns like scorching flame,
enfolds the earth, springs up like water clear.
Come, living love, live in our hearts today.

We sing a love that seeks another's good,
that longs to serve and not to count the cost,
a love that yielding finds itself made new.
Come, caring love, live in our hearts today.

We sing a love, unflinching, unafraid
to be itself despite another's wrath,
a love that stands alone and undismayed.
Come, strengthening love, live in our hearts today.

We sing a love, that wandering will not rest
Until it finds its way, its home, its source,
through joy and sadness pressing on refreshed.
Come, pilgrim love, live in our hearts today.

We sing the Holy Spirit, full of love,
who seeks out scars of ancient bitterness,
brings to our wounds the healing grace of Christ.
Come, radiant love, live in our hearts today.

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CLOSING WORDS Prayer by Shantideva, who was an 8th century Indian Buddhist monk.

May I become at all times, both now and forever

A protector of those without protection

A guide for those who have lost their way

A ship for those with oceans to cross

A bridge for those with rivers to cross

A sanctuary for those in danger

A lamp for those without light

A place of refuge for those who lack shelter

And a servant to all in need

For as long as space endures,

And for as long as living beings remain,

Until then may I, too, abide

To dispel the misery of the world.

CLOSING MUSIC 'Love can build a bridge', The Judds

<https://youtu.be/wmxJ7OzhCTY>