

“A Hidden Wholeness: Living Divided No More”
Romans 7:15-20

As we begin the sermon series “A Hidden Wholeness,” I would like to share with you a powerful image from Parker Palmer’s book by the same title. It is the image of a rope in a blizzard. Palmer writes, “There was a time when farmers on the Great Plains, at the first sign of a blizzard, would run a rope from the back door out to the barn. They all knew stories of people who had wandered off and been frozen to death, having lost sight of home in a whiteout while still in their own backyards. Today we live in a blizzard of another sort. It swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence, and their inevitable outcome, war. It swirls within us as fear and frenzy, greed and deceit, and indifference to the suffering of others. We all know stories of people who have wandered off into this madness and been separated from their own souls, losing their moral bearings and even their mortal lives: they make headlines because they take so many innocents down with them.”

To really get to the feelings of the power of holding on to the rope in a blizzard, here is a video from Antarctica called “Walk the Line”:
<https://youtu.be/x5XXF6U6vDQ>’.

We need to always hold on to the rope which is a metaphor for the soul. Yet, it is not easy work. When we are born, we have all the potential for goodness and a life of abundant joy. Yet, something shifts within us as we move into adulthood. Palmer writes, “As we become more obsessed with succeeding, or at least surviving, in that world, we lose touch with our souls and disappear into our roles. The child with a harmless after-school secret becomes the masked and armored adult -at considerable cost to self, to others, and to the world at large. It is a cost that can be itemized in ways well known to many of us:

- We sense that something is missing in our lives and search the world for it, not understanding that what is missing is us.
- We feel fraudulent, even invisible, because we are not in the world as who we really are.
- The light that is within us cannot illuminate the world's darkness.
- The darkness that is within us cannot be illuminated by the world's light.
- We project our inner darkness on others, making ‘enemies’ of them and making the world a more dangerous place.
- Our inauthenticity and projections make real relationships impossible, leading to loneliness.
- our contributions to the world---especially through the work we do-- are tainted by duplicity and deprived of the life-giving energies of true self.”

Living like we don't belong or living like we are better than others, or always feeling defensive or needing to attack others are some of the manifestations of this inner divide. Until we learn to embrace our light and our darkness and integrate them, the struggle will always control us.

It is fascinating to know that people through the ages have struggled with this kind of inner dividedness. Let's listen to the words of the Apostle Paul about his inner struggle as recorded in his letter to the Romans chapter 7, verses 15-20:

Romans 7:15-20

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

And from the Message:

What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God's command is necessary.

¹⁷⁻²⁰ But I need something more! For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

The Apostle Paul knew this struggle firsthand in his own life. Even though he was a man of faith and a committed follower of the way of Christ, he knew his own internal struggles between mind and heart. This was a letter which Paul wrote to a congregation that he was yet to visit. In an effort to help them admit their need for faith, Paul admitted to them his own need and his internal struggles. Even though he had an incredible experience of transformation on the way to Damascus and had become a dedicated follower of the way of Jesus Christ, he still found himself struggling to live according to the values of the kingdom of God. He was sharing this with them to help them through their difficult time. He knew that they had divisions in their church that mirrored the divisions and prejudices of the culture. The Gentile followers of Jesus had taken over the leadership of the church during

the time the Jews were expelled from Rome. When the Jewish believers came back, the Gentile followers of Jesus did not allow them to be in leadership. They started saying to them that they had replaced them because there was no need to be Jewish first to follow Jesus. Paul understood the sway of people's addictions to power and control and how these things block their ability to love and serve God freely. He admitted to them that even though on an intellectual level he may know what is right and what is wrong, he still struggled to put that into practice. In fact, he had found himself many times doing the opposite of what he knew to be right and thus he was in need of God's grace and of accessing that grace in his soul. Sometimes we feel discouraged because it seems like our failures and the failures of others are just so overwhelming. Yet, if we look at the example of Paul, we know that wholeness is not about being perfect. It is about accepting all the parts of ourselves. Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians these powerful words:

2 Corinthians 12:6-10

⁶But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, ⁷ even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep^[a] me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.^[b] ⁸ Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹ but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power^[c] is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

Embracing our weaknesses just as much as our strengths is not always easy. We learn from an early age to push away any part of us that seems to be weak or bad. We push it away and it lurks in the shadows. Instead of bringing it to God's grace, we try to hide it, even from God.

Parker Palmer writes that, "Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life. Knowing this gives me hope that human wholeness –mine, yours, and ours –need not be a utopian dream, if we can use devastation as a seedbed for new life."

Being whole is not for the fainthearted. It requires a lot of surrender on our part. Palmer identifies some of the obstacles for us on the path to wholeness as follows:

- Denial: We may say, "Surely what I have seen about myself cannot be true!"

- Evasion: We may find ourselves doubting the voice of our souls say, “the inner voice speaks softly, and truth is subtle, slippery thing, so how can I be sure of what my soul is saying?”
- Fear: “If I let that inner voice dictate the shape of my life, what price might I have to pay in a world that sometimes punishes authenticity?”
- Cowardice: We stay with what we know even if it is not working because the risk of change seems too high.
- Greed: “In some situations, I am rewarded for being willing to stifle my soul.
- False Community: We need others on this journey, but not all communities know how to welcome our souls; “some insult and invade it.”

So how do we learn to embrace our wholeness in the light of God’s grace and love? The invitation is for us to hold onto to the rope in the blizzards of life. The rope is the thread of soul that runs through all of life. Instead of looking at a frailty or weakness in us with disdain, we are invited to look for the thread of grace and soul that weaves in and through these unwanted parts of who we are. Knowing that even these parts are loved by God and accepted by our brothers and sisters in the community of faith. Going deep into that place of grace inside of us on a regular basis and with others can free us to live wholesome lives.

As you walked in today, you were given a red thread. I invite you to hold on to it and let it speak to you about your soul and God’s grace that is underneath all the events and details of your life. Amen.

The Way It Is

By William Stafford

There’s a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn’t change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can’t get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time’s unfolding.
You don’t ever let go of the thread.