

“A Hidden Wholeness: Being Alone Together”
Matthew 17:1-9

Today, I would like us to begin by listening to a song called “Love Heals.” This song was inspired by the work of a group called Thistle Farms which is a group that works with women to help them get off the street and to heal from exploitation and addiction. I know that some of you have listened to this song before, but it bears repeating. It is a powerful song about the power of genuine community where people are loved back to life to thrive and find hope after experiencing deep brokenness:
<https://youtu.be/53YKzNB2BUg>.

Hate kills, birds fly
Rocks roll and tears cry
And love...
Love heals

Whiskey burns, records scratch
Wheels turn, sparks catch
And love...
Love heals

Oh I've never seen a broken heart
Once shattered and torn apart
That could not come back together
And I've never known a life so heavy
Couldn't stand on legs unsteady
And one day run light as a feather
Baby here's the deal
Love heals

Sunsets, the suns rise
Our regrets and alibis
Dreamers dream, some dreams come true
We're caught between a hell that's coffee black
And heaven that's sky blue

Oh I've never seen a broken heart
Once shattered and torn apart
That could not come back together
And I've never known a life so heavy
Couldn't stand on legs unsteady
And one day run light as a feather

Baby here's the deal
Love heals

And everything that's shiny
One day gets broke
It's some kinda mystery
But this much I know
Love...
Love heals

I thought of this song as I thought of the power of community to heal us. But not any kind of community. It has to be a community that is intentional about its practices of creating spaces for our souls to show up and for us to be uniquely who we are. Community often brings images of conformity and our desperate attempts to fit in or to rebel. False community that does not heal is something we know all too well. Even with the best of intentions, we often end up creating community spaces that invite the intellect, the emotions, the will, and the ego to show. But we struggle to create spaces where the soul shows up because we are often in the mode of fixing or controlling ourselves and others. Yet, we need others to be our companions on this inner journey. It is the paradox of being with others while also being our own selves.

Palmer quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer who once wrote, "Let [the person] who cannot be alone beware of community. Let the person who is not in community beware of being alone." Palmer then continues on to share that "We have much to learn from within, but it is easy to get lost in the labyrinth of the inner life. We have much to learn from others, but it is easy to get lost in the confusion of the crowd. So we need solitude and community simultaneously...The people who help us grow toward true self offer unconditional love, neither judging us to be deficient nor trying to force us to change but accepting us exactly as we are." This is the story of Thistle Farms and how they created intentional communities that accept and allow women to know that unconditional love and thus be freed to be their best versions of themselves.

In our Bible story for today, we hear about an inner experience which Jesus had but for which he also invited three of his disciples to experience and witness with him. This story is often known as the transfiguration of Jesus.

This was a turning point for Jesus' ministry from Galilee to Jerusalem where he would face the cross. Matthew highlights a magnificent experience which Jesus told his disciples to keep secret until his resurrection. Jesus and three of his disciples went up to a mountain. And suddenly a major transformation took place in his life that was not only an inner change, but was also something that the disciples were able to see. His face

changed and his clothes became dazzling white. He was also accompanied by two important figures from Israel's faith traditions: Moses and Elijah. Let's listen to the story according to Matthew 17:1-9:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I^[a] will make three dwellings^[b] here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved;^[c] with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' ⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'

Even though the three disciples could not fully understand what was happening for Jesus, they learned to hold the space and confidentiality for him. Let's look at the different elements that made this possible. My hope is they will help us see how we can hold similar spaces for others to experience deep transformation.

First, the space: a mountain. Jesus was with a few of his disciples on a mountain. A lot of special events happen in the Bible on mountains. For the people of Israel, mountains were believed to be places where God dwells and where true worship can happen. Moses certainly encountered God in the burning bush on a mountain. The Ten Commandments were received on a mountain. The most important sermon Jesus gave was delivered on a mountain. So the space was intentional. It was a spot that had symbolic and spiritual meaning.

Second, the ministry of presence. We are not told that the disciples tried to explain the experience and to figure out if Jesus was human and divine. In fact, through Peter's response we know that they really didn't understand the experience in their heads. They were also in that space of the soul. They didn't try to have logical explanations of what was taking place. They were able to see the vision because their souls were present too.

Third, they had to keep this experience confidential. You would imagine that such a powerful experience would be so compelling that they had to share it with others, especially the rest of the discipleship group. But in order for the soul to show up, the other rewards of society such as fame, power, esteem, and control have to be not present. Holding the space as sacred and confidential was essential for such an experience to happen for Jesus and also for his disciples.

Holding a space of total acceptance, love, and sacred listening is the key to the experience of the disciples and to our own personal experiences of faith. Jesus was teaching his disciples how to live and practice their faith so that their community circles would become the breeding ground for people who know to help each other access their souls. The disciples were the ones who were going to continue Jesus' mission and they needed to be the ones who knew how to practice this ministry of presence.

Parker Palmer talks about such community experiences as circles of trust. They are designed specifically to help us experience both community and inner solitude where we learn to trust the following:

- The soul, its reality and power
- Each other to have the intention, discipline, and good-will to create and hold a space that is safe enough to welcome the soul
- The principles and practices that create such a space and safeguard the relationships within it, aware that the pull of conventional culture
- Welcoming the soul with no 'Change agenda' in mind

A circle of trust is something that has been carefully designed and practiced because it defies the norms of most of our community groupings. We will get into the circles of trust more deeply on the 28th of May, but today I would like to invite us to explore one of the key practices of a circle of trust, because it is something we can use in any conversation or community and not just in an intentional circle of trust. This is the practice of asking open and honest questions. Since our tendency is to ask questions with a focus on our need for information or for expressing our opinions, open and honest questions shift the focus to the other person so that they may listen to their own soul. Here are some of the guidelines for open and honest questions:

Guidelines for Open Honest Questions

Adapted from Parker Palmer

...in support of the rule "no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight"—and in support of our intention to help each other listen for inner truth...

- An honest, open question is one you cannot possibly ask while thinking, "I know the right answer to this and I sure hope you give it to me..." Thus, "Have you ever thought about seeing a therapist?" is not an honest, open question! But "What did you learn from the experience you just told us about?" is.
- Try not to get ahead of the presenter's language with your questions. "What did you mean when you said you felt sad?" is an honest, open question. "Didn't you also feel angry?" is not.
- Ask questions that are brief and to the point rather than larding them with rationales and background materials that allow you to insert your own opinions or advice.
- Ask questions that go to the person as well as the problem, questions about the inner realities of the situation as well as the outward facts.

- Ask questions aimed at helping the presenter explore his or her concern rather than satisfying your own curiosity.
- If you have an intuition that a certain question might be useful, even if it seems a bit “off the wall,” trust it—once you are reasonably certain that it is an honest, open question. E.g., “What color is this issue for you, and why?”
- If you aren’t sure about a particular question, sit with it for a while and wait for clarity.
- As a group, watch the pacing of the questions, allowing some silence between the last answer and the next question. Questions that come too fast may feel aggressive, cutting off the deep reflection that can help the presenter.
- If you have asked one question and heard an answer, you may feel a need to ask a follow-up question. But if you find yourself about to ask the third question in a row before anyone else has had a chance to ask one, don’t!
- Avoid questions with yes-no or right-wrong answers. At the same time, remember that the best questions are often simple and straightforward.

Today we are invited to practice this by sharing something that is not too deep.

One person is to share about something valuable they learned from an elder in their lives. The other two people are to listen and then try to ask open and honest questions with a focus on helping the person listen to the wisdom of their souls. If you can’t think of any questions, just hold the space.

We will end with a poem by John Fox. It is called *When Someone Deeply Listens to You*

When someone deeply listens to you
it is like holding out a dented cup
you've had since childhood
and watching it fill up with
cold, fresh water.
When it balances on top of the brim,
you are understood.
When it overflows and touches your skin,
you are loved.

When someone deeply listens to you
the room where you stay
starts a new life
and the place where you wrote
your first poem
begins to glow in your mind's eye.
It is as if gold has been discovered!

When someone deeply listens to you
your bare feet are on the earth
and a beloved land that seemed distant
is now at home within you.

Amen.