

Languishing

May 2, 2021

Throughout the pandemic, one of the highlights of our online worship has been the beautiful music offered by our members, friends, and staff. Nick Myers Olson was our first hymn leader, not only because he has a wonderful voice, but also because one of his moms was in the Common Ministry meeting when we decided we needed to transition to online worship and that to do so we would need a strong voice since it would not be healthy for the choir to sing together.

Since then, one of the strengths and joys of our online service has been the masterful way our Music Director, Seong-Kyung Graham has recruited musical worship leadership from amidst the congregation. We have truly been blessed with so many people offering their beautiful gifts in worship.

In addition to the wonderful musical offerings from people in our church community, we have, on occasion, invited musical guests from the wider Green Bay community, most recently Haley Steele. Haley's beautiful soprano voice was a treat to behold in worship the past two Sundays. After the service, Haley wrote this lovely thank you note:

I want to express my sincere gratitude for hiring me to record some worship music for Union UCC. Being able to sing in such a beautiful space, in-person with a wonderful collaborator in the service of worship after such a year has filled me with a depth of overwhelming gratitude. Thank you for connecting with me.

Perhaps it goes without saying that we've all been living through such a collective trauma with the pandemic, but I earnestly didn't realize how desensitized I had become to functioning so much of the time in a vigilant sort of survival mode. It all kind of caught up with me when I reached my vehicle after our recording session, and I felt a kind of hope again that I had long forgotten about, a hope in there being an "other side" to this pandemic.

Along with revealing that Haley has a gift with words as well as with her voice, her thank you note intersected with a rich article about languishing that ran in the New York Times last week. In the article, Adam Grant suggests that languishing is the dominant emotional state right now and lifts up some antidotes. The idea is that if depression is one end of the mental health spectrum and flourishing is the other end, languishing is in the middle. Less intense than the utter grief that many of us experienced early in the pandemic, languishing is a sense of stagnation, of emptiness, of muddling. Grant even cites "The Simpsons" and the frequent "meh" feeling many characters express.

Our Gospel passage today from the 21st chapter of the Gospel of John is the very end of that Gospel. The time setting of this passage isn't exactly clear. It starts, "After this..." referring to the previous passage about Jesus appearing to the disciples and Thomas after the resurrection, but doesn't say how long after those experiences.

Today, I'd like you to envision that this passage takes place a good amount of time after the resurrection, that Peter and the disciples are no longer in the depth of their grief following the crucifixion, but that they're now languishing. They're not in the valley of depression, which Grant describes in the New York Times article as "feeling despondent, drained, and worthless," but neither are they flourishing which is defined as having a "strong sense of meaning, mastery, and mattering to others."

In some ways, both literally and figuratively, they're back to where they were before their life with Jesus began: The meaning that following Jesus had infused into their lives, the teaching and healing and forgiving they had done in his name, had been leached out with the crucifixion, and for Peter, with his denials. They're literally back to fishing on the Sea of Galilee, they're not catching any fish, which tells us that they're not experiencing mastery of their trade, and they're psycho-spiritually back where they had started, too.

They're languishing. They're...meh.

Friends, psychologists recommend that one of the best strategies for managing emotions is to name them, and so, one of the first things I lift up to you is to name, to acknowledge, the low-grade malaise that many of us are feeling. In our Gospel, like the long-haul toll that pandemic is taking on us emotionally and spiritually, the disciples are no longer in the depth of despair, no longer engaging with the trauma of Jesus' death, but they're also not flourishing. Rather than offering an elaborate theological treatise, Jesus builds a bonfire on the beach and grills some breakfast for his friends.

Bessel Van Der Kolk, a pioneer in the psychology of trauma, suggests that trauma is held not in our minds, but in our bodies, and therefore, even before talk therapy can be effective, physical actions and healing are critical. Before our minds can have the capacity to process and make sense of traumatic experiences, an abundantly helpful step is engaging in things like taking walks, doing yoga, or taking long showers or baths.

I wonder if this is part of the divine wisdom as to why so many of the post-resurrection stories in the Bible include touch, walking, and eating. Long before a psychologist wrote a book about it, people of faith have intuited the divine wisdom that in order to heal from trauma, we need first to take action to de-stress our bodies. Then, only after Jesus has engaged with Peter's physical, bodily stress and trauma, does he start to process with Peter verbally.

He asks, "Peter, do you love me?" three times. I wonder if this doesn't key into the dynamic that Jesus is asking Peter to go deep, not to just answer the question on a surface level, but really answer. The dynamic here isn't "How are you / I am fine," but rather, "How ARE you?"

After we've named our feelings and have held space for the healing of our physicality, the Times article on languishing suggests that focusing on a small goal can help to transcend languishing. Could this be what Jesus is recommending to Peter when he says, "Tend my lambs," and again, "Feed my sheep"? Could part of the divine wisdom of this passage be that Jesus is giving Peter a small, concrete task, to help him feel a sense of accomplishment and purpose?

Remember, the definition of flourishing we're working with here is "a strong sense of meaning, mastery and mattering to others," a definition that I would suggest is the epitome of what Jesus is talking about earlier in the Gospel of John when he says that he came that we might have abundant life. Jesus' purpose is to forge human flourishing. That flourishing is what Haley Steele was talking about in the thank you note she wrote to the church for the opportunity to offer her gifts in worship, and flourishing is what so many of us have experienced a lack of amidst pandemic.

Now, lest we imagine flourishing is wholly in our own hands, I remind you, "resurrection is not something we do. Jesus was raised from the dead. He didn't raise himself. Resurrection is God's work.

What we need to do these days is simply to open ourselves, our minds, our hearts just as the tomb was opened, and step out into the light, trusting that it is God who is raising us. It is God who will raise us into a new reality we can't even imagine at this point." (WI Conference Life 4/26/21)

Friends, if you are languishing, my prayer for you this week is that you will name and acknowledge your experience, that you will attend to your physicality, and that you will engage in small, meaningful goals that contribute to your flourishing, but most of all, that you will be open to the resurrection life that God is raising within you.

May it be so! Alleluia, and amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Acts 9:1-20, John 21:1-17
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