

Healing the Splits in our Lives
Sunday, September 5, 2021, 11:15 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Dr. Sally Howard

Quote: Jesus calls us to be whole hearted, trusting in our worthiness and allowing ourselves to be seen and known for who we really are.

Everyone has a story that will break your heart. And if you are really paying attention, most people will have a story that will bring you to your knees.

As I read those words of Brene Brown this week and they resonated all the way through me. All Saints, this has been a hard week! I have heard many of you say, "I just can't deal with the new, I can't see one more image, not one one more minute of devastating news!"

And yet attention must be paid. I was truly horrified to read in the Times that transgender women, already understood to have mortality rates, are now being targeted in MacArthur park and brutally attacked.

Even the end of our involvement in a war that was doomed to failure, has forced us to face that we have been guided by an interventionist policy from beginning to end, rooted in geo-political interests above and over human interest. The stories are hard to bear as I worry—with all of you—about the men, women and children lost, and to be lost. Once again, children are being sent alone without parents to our country as we heartlessly try to turn them away, as if they don't belong in our world. When will we understand that their fate matters no less than children of our own families....because we are one human family and our fates cannot be separated. I know as do all of you, that to hear the stories of others with compassion is to have a heart that will break. God, what do we do and where do we find hope?

And these are not the only devastating stories this week. Women's reproductive rights were dealt a major blow at the hands of the Supreme Court, threatening all girls and women, but especially the young and and women caught in the cross hairs of economic disparity and race.

Can we even comprehend that vigilantes in Texas can turn in anyone involved in an abortion for a 10,000 dollar reward? Extreme weather is causing suffering and death due to our refusal to acknowledge human made climate change. There is no sugar coating how serious the situation is and how painful this week has been.

Sometimes it easier to feel compassion for those far away, but harder with those closer by. It can be even more challenging in our own community or our own families.

How do we stop ourselves from getting caught up in projection or judgement as we listen to each other's stories? We are so drawn to either/or dualities that we split things up that actually go together, like—grace and accountability;

kindness and telling the truth,

tenderness and strength;

or heart and rationality.

This is especially true when we are tired and afraid, and we certainly are. So we choose gossip and intrigue rather than honest conversation and trust. We resort to cynicism and devaluing rather than facing loss. Fear narrows our tolerance and can make us meet difference with dismissiveness or competition. It can make us simplify our perceptions of each other, so that we misunderstand their intent, and lose the richness of another person's story in favor of our own story of who they are. When we collapse another human being into our own story of who they are, we really can't go anywhere holy and good. We especially need to hear those whose stories have been silenced.

Jewish theologian and philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas once said there are 1000s of ways to kill each other—indifference, appropriation, attempts to neutralize or dominate, and yes murder. Sometimes it's because of the way that the other person is not like us, that dethrones us, disturbs us from our comfort zone, and defies our control. We see this played out all around us, on both the national and international scene. Sometimes, we painfully see it in ourselves, as we disrespect, dehumanize, and collapse each other's rich stories into simplistic paper silhouettes.

Jesus' words in the gospel come to save us from splitting things apart. In fact the word "religion" means re-bind", reconnect that which has been torn apart. But the religious leaders of Jesus' day advocated keeping things separate. What you ate was a small part of a comprehensive and complex holiness code that regulated the personal and community life of every Jew. The Levitical purity laws regulated nearly every aspect of being human—birth, death, sex, gender, health, economics, social relations, hygiene, and certainly ethnicity. This way of controlling life and the vulnerability of being human, by separating things and people into categories of pure and unpure, is not particular or limited to the Pharisees of Jesus' time!

Throughout the gospels the religious leaders criticized Jesus because of his flagrant disregard for ritual purity. Jesus the Jew touched lepers and a bleeding woman, he walked among the graves to heal a mentally ill man, and he ignored sabbath laws, practicing compassion instead. He handled a corpse, healed two Gentiles and his circle of disciples included women. In this story, it would have been shocking and offensive to hear Jesus declare all foods 'clean'. The central issue in this particular clash was

that the pharisees couldn't control Jesus, and they were afraid of losing not only power, but a whole system of controlling their bodies and the bodies of other people.

When Jesus tells his disciples, and us, that it is not from without that we are defiled but from within, he isn't saying our hearts are bad. He is saying that we are easily pulled away from the awareness that the whole world is sacred and infused with the breath of God, deserving our bended knee. There is no split between clean and unclean, between worthy and unworthy, no split of body, mind and spirit. There is only unity across difference. Jesus knows that we are easily split apart, that when our hearts separate from our minds and our bodies, we become dreadfully alienated from our true selves that are in union with God's love. It's a problem of where our hearts dwell—in the house of love and trust, or in the house of fear and suspicion.

Instead Jesus calls us to be whole hearted, trusting in our worthiness and allowing ourselves to be seen and known for who we really are. When we do that for each other, allowing their stories to change ours, we honor the spiritual connection that grows from trust, respect, kindness and affection. This bonding is God's story of healing for ourselves and the world. It's hard work my friends! We need hope and encouragement, and that's why I'd like to end with this story.

At the beginning of the COVID pandemic, the city of Pasadena lost 75% of its shelter beds and all of its day centers closed. Our campus became a refuge for a few people who needed shelter. Our reputation for compassion and hospitality spread, and as more and more unhoused people were displaced, the numbers on our campus grew to unmanageable proportions. At this point, Mike our rector met with the experts—Union Station, a ministry of our church that had its origins on the northwest corner of our parking lot. Together they developed a plan, the Safe Haven Bridge to Housing to help eradicate the condition of homelessness. Our program came into full operation in October.

There had been a vigorous debate, differences of opinion, and fear that could have caused a split in our community, polarizing into those with compassion vs. those without, or those who are realistic and good stewards of our campus vs. those who are not. Instead we listened respectfully to each other and improved our plans *and* our unity across diversity. In the end, our vestry chose to make the wholehearted decision to support the Safe Haven program. With this decision, we put our hearts, minds, and our bodies into action on behalf of our unhoused siblings.

To date, the All Saints Safe Haven program has secured permanent supportive housing for 6 people and long term temporary housing for four. We have a full time housing navigator funded by the city, who not only helps our community members, but gets many other unhoused people health and mental health services, and into the long pipeline for housing. A generous donation came in for Safe Haven from the estate of a person who had never even crossed the threshold of our church and an additional amount followed for the church as a whole. Don't tell me that there's a split between good business

and good church. I don't believe it! And rest assured, we haven't stopped rattling the city chambers to address the structures of economic disparity that prevent affordable housing for all.

This last Tuesday, a hearing was held to approve our application for a zoning permit to allow Safe Haven to continue, and we asked this community for letters of support. The City reported that we have set the record for the most letters of support for any zoning application in the city's history! The hearing officer had visited our campus and was impressed to see no day time impact of our safe haven community's presence at night. The campus is clean by the initiative of the safe haven community and our B & G staff, and the incidents of vandalism are lower than before the pandemic.

God's world is a win win world of abundance.

There were five speakers at the hearing, and the last person to speak was a graduate of our program. She told her story with a heart and a mind free of the anxiety of survival.

She now works in the Rose Bowl museum, and in just a few months has been promoted to a top position. Her words told her story of being loved and sheltered by this church, freed from the anxiety of where she would safely sleep. She spoke of how being able to keep even the basic essentials in a locker here allowed her to go to medical appointments or other appointments necessary to access secure housing, without fear that they would be stolen. She gratefully stated in the clearest of terms that this church—this community that welcomed her as a member and a person of dignity and respect, transformed her. She said that our circle of care saved her life. Her story and our story are now intertwined. The power of whole hearted living aligned with the love of Christ brought me to my knees, and is evidence that trusting each other across difference in the power and unity of the Holy Spirit will heal this fractured world yet.

As we care for each other and take conscientious action,
as we open our hearts to each others stories,
may we trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to keep us in hope.

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all.

Emily Dickinson

Amen