

Trauma & Faith: A Conversational Sermon

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Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Romans 8:26-39

Hymns: VT 209 - We Dream of a Turning; VT 600 - O Thou, in Whose Presence; VT 706- O Healing River

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (NRSV):

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:

- ² a time to be born and a time to die;
- a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted;
- ³ a time to kill and a time to heal;
- a time to break down and a time to build up;
- ⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh;
- a time to mourn and a time to dance;
- ⁵ a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together;
- a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;
- ⁶ a time to seek and a time to lose;
- a time to keep and a time to throw away;
- ⁷ a time to tear and a time to sew;
- a time to keep silent and a time to speak;
- ⁸ a time to love and a time to hate;
- a time for war and a time for peace.

Romans 8:26-39 (NRSV):

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, how will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ who died, or rather, who was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

SUSANNE: We have been dealing with a number of heavy topics in our worship series this summer on Peaceful Endings/Peace to the End, whether personal (transitions in our lives, death and dying, etc.) or communal (the climate emergency, racism, war and peace). The last

couple of Sundays, we focused on the book of Revelation, and I made the case that this was a “trauma text” – an attempt by the early church to make sense of the suffering and persecution they were experiencing under the Roman Empire. Building on this, today Fern and I will have a conversation about the relationship between trauma and faith. And I’m grateful to Fern for lending her expertise in psychology to this conversation!

SUSANNE: Let’s start with some definitions: 1. **What is trauma? How is it different from a challenging experience of loss or grief, moral injury, intergenerational trauma, etc.?**
What is PTSD?

FERN: There are many definitions of trauma some of which include multiple types of life experiences and other definitions which are relatively narrow. Within those definitions there are different types. In my work, I find it useful to think of trauma as an event that occurs when someone either witnessed or experienced an event that is life threatening. Examples would be living in a war zone, being the victim of an assault, including a sexual assault, experiencing a natural disaster.

Trauma is sometimes a discrete event such as a car accident. Other times, such as the work I do with RCMP or military members, there are multiple events that they experience through their career that accumulate.

Complex trauma is a term used for a situation in which a person experienced severe abuse or neglect as a child. We recognize complex trauma separately because of the profound impact that childhood trauma has on the development of child both emotionally and physically. It can leave a vulnerability to future life events that is very significant.

Intergenerational trauma refers to the trauma that is carried from generation to generation. At first we thought this effect was primarily related to the culture of a family in which the parents or grandparents had experienced abuse and the changes that occurred in how they parented their children. We now understand that those trauma changes are also at the genetic level.

I find it useful in my work to consider loss and grief as different from trauma, because there are some different ways to process grief vs. trauma. Often the most significant symptoms is profound sadness. When complicated bereavement sets in, however, you can sometimes see a lot of similarities between the effects of trauma and the effects of a loss of a loved one or job or place. Loss of purpose, withdrawal, low motivation, and hopelessness are some of the characteristics of complicated grief. And, of course, they intersect with the symptoms of PTSD, depression, and other emotion patterns.

When I first started working with the RCMP & Military members and Veterans of those organizations, I used a lens primarily of PTSD to understand the nightmares, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance, etc. As I continued working, however, I came to understand that for some members the moral injuries that occurred during their service were sometimes more profound than the traumatic events they experienced. One psychologist’s definition of a moral injury is, “a syndrome of shame...anger, and demoralization that occurs when deeply held beliefs and expectations about moral and ethical conduct are transgressed.” (Litz, p.21) Examples include seeing trusted leaders violate the principles of an organization or being commanded to violate one’s own moral principles. It is a

profound moral challenge because of acts perpetrated by oneself or by others that violates the moral tenets that a person lives by. A moral injury can have some of the same symptoms of PTSD or grief, but often there is a strong sense of anger or betrayal, if the act was committed by someone else, or shame and self-loathing, if the act was committed by the person. When we treat moral injury, it is often very helpful for the person to seek out members of their faith community to help them make sense of it.

FERN: 2. What is trauma theology? Why is it needed?

SUSANNE: I've been reading a number of books on trauma theology recently. This is a relatively new field in Christian thought that brings theology into conversation with psychology and more recent studies about trauma. One of these trauma theologians, Shelly Rambo, started with these questions: "What does our theology do? Does it have the capacity to touch pain, or does it bypass it, move above it, or too readily sweep it up into overarching narratives of redemption and victory?"¹

- So the problem these theologians were seeing and trying to address was that people of faith and the church haven't always held space for difficult experiences, but have responded with platitudes or a sense that if one has enough faith, bad things won't happen in one's life at all (prosperity gospel – faith = health, wealth, and happiness). If bad things do happen, one should be able to "heal" and get over them very quickly. But what about traumatic events, like Fern talked about? These theologians are concerned that in order to take trauma seriously, our theology can't simply rush toward healing and redemption, but must make space for this depth of pain.
- Part of what trauma theologians have done is remind us that the Bible itself makes space for trauma, even though that term did not yet exist in Bible times. The Bible talks about suffering in many places: the book of Job, Shelly Rambo's idea of Holy Saturday,² the cross as a traumatic event, God's constant presence with us through all circumstances – the Romans 8 passage. The fact that these experiences are in the Bible gives us permission to also speak about them in worship, for example, like we're doing today!
- The church can make space to "bear witness" to one another's struggles and joys, foster gratitude practices, hope, and resilience. One thinks of Job's friends, who though their advice to Job was ultimately unhelpful, they still sat with him in the ash-heap and shared in his mourning in that way. The disciples who bore witness to Jesus' crucifixion likewise stayed with him through that pain, and later were, to their astonishment, witnesses to his resurrection.

¹ Shelly Rambo, "Foreword," in *Feminist Trauma Theologies: Body, Scripture, and Church in Theological Perspective*, ed. Karen O'Donnell and Katie Cross (London: SCM Press, 2020), xvii.

² Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

SUSANNE: Given what we've each said, 3. What do hope and healing/recovery look like? Let's start with psychology:

FERN: One thing I found very interesting as I focused my therapy work more on PTSD is that this is a mental illness characterized by avoidance. It is most often as we avoid thinking or feeling or talking about the event that PTSD takes hold. One of the theories is that our brain is driven to try to make sense of our experiences. When that process is blocked, the natural healing is blocked. When we make room for the experiences within ourselves through mindfulness or meditation or talking to others, we allow ourselves the healing within our brain. Amazingly enough, PTSD can cause actual volume changes in certain areas of the brain. The prefrontal cortex, our "making sense" or planning part of our brain can become smaller. And our amygdala, or alarm centre, can become larger. Astonishingly, trauma-focused treatment can reverse this change. I have seen this in my work, where a person was struggling to read a book or organize their thoughts is able to do these things again after treatment. Bearing witness can have a tremendous healing effect.

Within one approach to trauma, Acceptance & Commitment Therapy, the acronym ACE is used for one way to slow down and notice/accept our feelings and thoughts:

A = Acknowledge the painful thought or feelings (or any thought or feeling)

C = Contact the body. Where is it residing in your body? What are other sensations or feelings also occurring in your body? (part of making room for it in the larger context of your body)

E = Engage in the outside world. What do my senses tell me about the present & where I am? How do I want to engage with the world, despite or because of these thoughts?

Without the Acknowledge part, it is just distraction, which doesn't help us in the long run to process our feelings or thoughts or sensations.

FERN: What about in theology – what do healing and recovery look like?

SUSANNE: - The theologians that I've read agree that it's important not to rush people toward recovery, especially in the wake of a traumatic experience, as this can minimize what they've been through.

- Mindfulness and gratitude practices (faith-based or not) can be part of recovery, the church can be a place of processing one's experience with a supportive witness(es), or provide support as one begins therapy.

- As people of faith, we can hold space for difficult experiences to be acknowledged and named, which can be an important step on the journey to recovery and, ultimately, healing.