

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • JUNE 14, 2020
“BRAVING THE WILDERNESS”

The Psalm Litany
Based on Psalm 107

*Some of us wandered for years in the desert, looking but not finding
a good place to live, half-starved and parched with thirst, staggering
and stumbling on the brink of exhaustion.*

Yet, our God is so good, and God’s love never runs out.

*Some of us were sick because we’ve lived poor lives,
our bodies feeling the effects of our choices; so hungry for nourishment
we couldn’t stand the sight of food, so miserable we thought we’d be better off dead.*

Yet, our God is mercy, and God’s love never runs out.

*Some of us set sail in big ships; we put to sea to do business all on our own,
yet the winds come, the oceans storm, towering waves!
We are shot high in the sky, then the bottom drops out.*

Yet our God is miraculous love, and God’s love never runs out.

Song of Focus
Wounded Healers
Words and Music by Ed Varnum

1. Wounded, torn, you brought us healing,
Knitting strong each broken place;
Renewed, reborn, compassion feeling
Others’ pain: Amazing Grace!

Refrain

Wounded healers, in compassion,
Reach the hurting all around.
May your healing touch through our caring action
Heal lives as love surrounds.

2. Christ, you endured the world’s rejection,
Know our pain and understand.
You give us hope in resurrection
Healing with your nail-scarred hands,

Refrain

Wounded healers, in compassion,

Reach the hurting all around.
May your healing touch through our caring action
Heal lives as love surrounds.
Heal through our lives 'til peace abounds.

The Scripture **Acts 5:12-16**

Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by. A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

The Message ***Braving the Wilderness: Healing*** **Mark Briley**

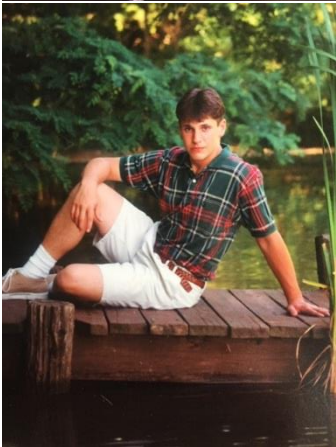
Synopsis: The disciples, getting well themselves, recovering from the heart-stopping realities of Jesus' departure, are now bringing that wellness to all they encounter. When you get healthy, it seems others around you grow healthier as well. Even finding your way into the shadow cast by Peter was encouraging and healing to many. You serve more, your shadow casts further, deeper, and transforms the lives of others. As we find ourselves trying to live forward through uncharted territory, we pray for growing health and strength that we may be a healing presence in the world.

"...they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by." (Acts 5:15)





This guy. Seventeen years old. Hand-me-down suit. Same hairstyle since childhood – the bowl cut with a fade to a point in the back. Senior pic before starting my last year of high school.



I also found an epic senior pic pose as well – that guy, on a dock I had never seen before, those socks. He’s going to take the world. Huh. Well. I don’t have a picture, but I remember what I wore to my high school graduation. It was a short sleeved, light checkered, buttoned up shirt and khaki pants. I wore a navy tie (*at least during the ceremony*). It was the first tie of my very own – certainly the first one that wasn’t a clip on or zipper tie. I had cut my hair since those senior pics – cut it short the final semester of high school after all those years. I began cutting my own hair at that point and have for the last 23 years since graduation – thus – the same haircut for that same timespan. Old habits die hard. It wasn’t a great outfit – and I’m not sure what made it stick in my memory over the tassel turning, speech giving, cake-cutting stuff that went along with the day. I suppose it’s the picture that I come across occasionally of an 18-year-old me, dressed in the way I just described, totally unaware of what was in store for the next 20+ years.

Do you ever do that with old photos? Maybe you’re thumbing through that old shoe box of high school relics, mixed tapes, notes you swapped, or you turn the pages of an old yearbook and you look into the eyes of that old you, sighing deeply, and marveling at what you now know that you couldn’t possibly have known at that previous time. Whether that sounds familiar or not, I’m sure most of us have been asked that familiar question, *“If your current self could give your old self one word of advice, what would it be?”*

Have you ever answered that question? Some could respond easily: *“Don’t eat the tacos at the reunion,”* or *“Even though it will seem like a good idea to date so and so the summer after your junior year of college, save the heartache.”* Maybe you would say to your old self, *“Value your health – physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. No one else will do that for you.”* With all we’re facing today, you might go back and tell your high school graduate self – *“Watch your biases. Don’t judge another’s journey. Educate yourself on the experience of others. Listen to the plights of those who are oppressed, grow your own heart... don’t write them off. Check your privilege now and use it for the good of others.”*

What would you tell your old-self? With graduations happening right now in so many ways... my own Macon High School among them this past week (*Shout out Class of '97!*) ... one thing remains the same – our Broadway seniors we’ve been celebrating

for a few weeks now, find themselves on the front side of that journey. If nothing more, dear Seniors, know that so many of us have been in your shoes even if our shoes didn't all fit the same way yours do at this time in your life. You'll undoubtedly look back on this season of your life as a time in history generations will study.

Your granddaughter will invite you to her elementary school one day to talk to the class about what it was like living through a pandemic and the most historic battle for racial equality in history. What you're doing now will be part of that story you tell. That's true of the rest of us, too.

The apostles were wading through their college years, if you will, in the book of Acts following their three-year boot camp with Jesus and that graduation speech on the beach when Jesus told Peter to "*feed and tend my sheep.*" They're out there doing that feeding and tending now; figuring it out as they go – building on signs and wonders and growing in health and maturity in the process. They were preaching, spreading the word, holding signs with **#samaritanlivesmatter** because they were the humans not being heard at the time. The apostles meeting place was Solomon's Portico – the porch of the Temple – a very important and public place to share the news and the work they were doing. The church was alive, on the streets, embodying the Gospel.

The text offers an interesting line that says, "*None of the rest dared to join [the Apostles] but the people held them in high esteem.*" It suggests there was some uncertainty about what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would later call the cost of discipleship. This is often the case. In fact, throughout scripture we hear the writers talk about two kinds of people around Jesus, two kinds of people which we now find around the Apostles – "*disciples*" and "*crowd.*" My colleague, the Rev. Daphne Gascot offers this insight about these two categories – "*disciples*" and the "*crowd.*" She says, "*Crowd tends to leave after needs are met. Crowd won't reorient their lives around Jesus.*"¹ But disciples get in the mix, join the action of the arena... heart and soul unable to remain in the stands with the crowd. So, I say to myself these days: "*Self – which are you? Disciple or crowd?*" The problem with this question is that we tend to jump into comparison mode. If I can't be a disciple like Saint So-and-so, then I'll just stick with checking the '*crowd*' box on my statement of religious affiliation. But I'll tell you what we've all heard for years: Comparison is the thief of contentment. Comparing your discipleship to others won't grow you into the you that you are designed to be.

We're seeing this comparison right now as everyone is trying to find their place in their response to COVID and the ongoing quest for racial equality. Everybody's getting judgy about your response or mine. I've had folks call me wanting to march or demonstrate but don't feel safe to do so because of COVID or other health issues. It's okay. Just like Scripture that reminds us we all have something unique to bring to the

¹ <http://downeymemorial.org/staff/>. Rev. Daphne Marie Gascot Arias was most recently the Senior Pastor of Downey Memorial Christian Church in Downey, CA.

table, you have something unique to bring to the movement now. Some *will* walk. Some will call government officials. Some will donate to causes focused on the effort. Some will listen and study and let go of previous biases so as to truly seek to understand. Some will teach a child. I had a friend who sent the reminder that advocating as Jesus would advocate won't be done perfectly. It may feel uncomfortable and you may feel like you're not doing it right. But our imperfect offerings may make a bigger difference than we could ever imagine.

Checking the disciple box doesn't mean smooth sailing or an easy course or a road without failure. Shake that misnomer right now because we'll never live up to some sort of idealized perfection. This is why it's important for us to share the honest, vulnerable part of our human stories. We're good at telling the stained-glass stories – the times when we are the hero of the story. But braving the wilderness of our honest stories creates greater space and courage for more of the crowd to move into discipleship. And in these days, when the pain is raw and close to the surface, we are listening to, and sharing, our vulnerable stories more than ever before. So, don't shy away from the messy parts. Be willing to talk about your complicated moments; the stress, the times you were overwhelmed, exhausted, frustrated, confused, even devastated... but kept going. In this way, know that the grass isn't really greener on the other side. It's green where you water it.

The apostles on the front porch of Solomon's temple are working out the mission day after day. There is no blueprint. There is no church growth conference to attend. They can't YouTube – "*How to be the Church.*" They gathered, shared their stories of transformation – of people being healed, of the struggles they encountered. They surely compared notes about their sermons – effective illustrations, jokes that fell short, conversion stories that were powerful and could be shared in other parts of town. And they went out to do it, to be it, all over again. "*More than ever,*" the text says, "*believers, great numbers of both men and women, were added [to the following].*" Let me say something here about the word '*believers*' because we have our own take on this in the American church which is not always the most helpful. When we think '*believers*,' we think of those who intellectually ascribe to a list of doctrines but the word *belief* in the biblical context more closely is defined as something to give one's heart to. John's gospel, in particular, equates the word *belief* with *trust*. Marcus Borg delved into this more deeply a couple of decades ago. He said, and I paraphrase, "*We've really confused this idea – we think belief is this list of things you have to write your name at the end of and say, 'Yes, I agree.'* *Actually,*" he goes on, "*belief is to give one's heart away.*" When Jesus asks us to believe, he's asking us to trust in his way of life. It has been said that the Gospel is deep enough for an elephant to swim and shallow enough for a toddler to wade. With this kind of range in the waters of faith, you're going to swim at your own pace – I can't coerce you to swim faster, I can't convince you to jump off the high dive. No. But here is the decision we all face. When we truly hear the gospel, will we decide '*crowd*' isn't the designation we're after and give our hearts to being

disciples? Some people won't be satisfied until you do it, do the faith, their way but then, I ask, is doing it their way really your faith at all?

The apostles are getting healthy. They have recovered from the heart-stopping realities of Jesus departure and have now positioned themselves to bring that wellness to the world as well. When you get healthy, it seems others around you grow healthier too. You may not have the power to change another person who is on a path of destruction, but your own growing health may help them, or others, turn things around in some life-changing ways. This is why, when on an airplane, the instruction is to put your oxygen mask on first before helping those around you. I know there are places that metaphor doesn't hold up but generally speaking – your health projects or inspires health in others more than your talk or social media post or opinion about health ever will. The crowd may watch your faithfulness over and over again and someday imagine for themselves that stepping into the arena is possible for them. The disciples found a way to become accessible to the people. We wouldn't be here today if they hadn't.

The disciples found a way to step out, flaws and all, to be vulnerable enough to share, *"This is how it happened for me. This is where I failed. This is how I got back up again."* Are we willing to share that kind of faith today? The world is a great wilderness – if we can't be honest about what we've encountered ourselves, how do we expect our graduates to brave it thinking no one before them ever struggled through it? This is the importance of this moment. We're not going to get it all right. There will be no *"Yearbook Superlatives for 'Most likely to be Woke.'"* We just need to be faithful... lean into the cries of our black and brown skinned brothers and sisters and take a step forward. You may have seen the meme some have shared saying, *"There are no white people in the Bible. Take all the time you need with that."* The story of our faith is so beautifully diverse and constantly expanding to *"let in"* another who's been previously rejected.

Dr. Brene Brown, author of the book, *"Braving the Wilderness,"* which is a companion to our current series, shared an interview she conducted with actress, Viola Davis. Viola is most known for her performances in *The Help*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, and *Fences*. She's the first black actor to win the Triple Crown of acting – the Emmy, Tony, and Oscar. A couple of years ago, Time magazine named her one of the one hundred most influential people in the world. Brene asked her about what it means to belong, and she said, *"I spent the first three-quarters of my life feeling*



like a square peg in a round hole. I did not physically fit in. I lived in an Irish Catholic area of Rhode Island – white girls with long blond hair. I was a kinky-haired girl with dark skin who spoke different. I wasn't pretty. I carried the trauma of growing up in abject poverty- the daughter of a violent alcoholic. I was a bed-wetter until I was twelve or thirteen. I smelled. Teachers complained about the smell and sent me to the nurse's office. I was wrong. This was my beginning. My language for belonging was about survival: Can I take a hot shower? Is there food today? Will my dad kill my mom? Will there be rats in the house? I had no tools – I carried this trauma, fear, anxiety, and the inability to speak up for myself into my adult life. All of it was deeply rooted in shame. I spent all my energy hiding and keeping the brutality of my life secret. I carried this dysfunction with me into my adult life."

*"At thirty-eight," she said, "things changed. I didn't jump out of bed one morning and everything was perfect. I've always known I was a strong woman, but I wanted 'fast-food joy – quick, easy joy. More tools and tricks. I also could still fall back into 'not enough – not pretty enough, not thin enough, not good enough.'" One day, her therapist asked a pivotal question: "What if nothing changes – your looks, your weight, your success – would you be okay?" For the first time, she thought, "You know what? Yes, I would. I really would." She goes on to tell a beautiful story of finding her way through the wilderness of life, the death and reconciliation she experienced with her abusive, alcoholic father, and finished by saying, "Today, I live by a few simple rules: **1.** I'm doing the best I can. **2.** I will allow myself to be seen. **3.** I'll go further, unafraid. Put it all out there. Won't leave anything on the floor." **4.** I will not be a mystery to my daughter. She will know me, and I will share my stories with her – the stories of failure, shame, and accomplishment. She will know she's not alone in that wilderness." And then she makes these four, short, poignant statements:*

"This is who I am."

"This is where I am from."

"This is my mess."

"This is what it means to belong to myself."²

To get to this moment on Solomon's porch, where the Apostles could gather, share honestly their stories of who they were, how Christ saved their lives, how they were living the struggle forward, they had to continually heal the wounds of their past and present shortcomings, with hope enough for the future that they could become a healing salve for those around them. There is more faith in an honest testimony of

struggle, woundedness and healing than in all the creeds combined. I think this is why we form community as a church. We want to learn, yes. We want to intellectually challenge ourselves to understand. But intellectually explaining everything, describing it in detail, footnoting it all only takes us so far. We ultimately come to bear witness to each other's stories... not to judge them but consecrate them, heal them, celebrate them and say, "*I hear you. I see you. I'm with you.*" This is what our black brothers and sisters have always deserved and what I hear the world longing for with them right now. It's not just intellectual consent. It's solidarity... partnership... witness.

Almost 21 years ago now, I stood at the altar of the little First Church of the Nazarene on the other side of Columbia alongside my bride-to-be. I was nervous. Not to get married – I was all in for that. I was nervous, because I had decided to secretly serenade Carrie during the service – I'm pretty sure I made up some of the words of that song along the way but I got through it and I meant every word, even when I made them up. My heart was full. But, intellectually, there was a thought to say out loud in the ceremony something I heard a colleague of mine once proclaim: "*Today we are getting married because it has been proven sociologically and throughout history that the marriage contract is an essential way to form community and to enlarge the human race and continue to move forward in an appropriate way.*"²

Part of me wanted to say that. I didn't. Those would be the worst, most robotic vows ever, right? What *did* we say instead? "*For better, for worse. For richer, for poorer. In sickness and health.*" What was that? A promise. A promise that we could trust in each other. A promise that says when we are at our worst, the other would be there to pick him up. When we are at our best, there would be a partner to celebrate with me. A promise. Simple and clear. Given in love. And K-Ci and Jo-Jo of "Jodeci" fame sang us out of that place on what was probably a mixed tape we made for the wedding – "*All my life, I prayed for someone like you and I thank God that I, that I finally found you.*" True story.

We need to make good on some of God's promises these days. We owe that to the hurting. We owe that to the marginalized. We owe that to each other.

To our graduates? What a strange season to graduate. I know you've had to be creative about celebrating. You might even remember 20-years later what you wore and how you posed in an empty football stadium for pictures or had a socially distanced cook out on the front lawn with your grandparents or how you marched in a protest with your classmates. Undoubtedly with the wisdom you'll glean in the years ahead, you'll look back with some advice for your old-self. We all do this. And in this pivotal moment in history, I pray that as you're leading the charge for justice in so many ways, we all might do our part to bring about the beautifully diverse realm of God

² As shared by Rev. Dr. Glen Miles in a story about his own wedding. Glen is the Senior Minister at First Community Church in Columbus, OH. <https://fcchurch.com/>

to earth as God so intends. So be courageous, my friends. Don't settle to be designated as one of the "*crowd*" but rather among those counted among the disciples who follow Jesus honestly, with vulnerability and purpose. For the times the church has failed to be the reflection of Jesus we aspire to be; we have, and we will yet... we ask forgiveness. But let's not throw up our hands. Let's try again. Even with our flaws... and sometimes through them... may we all, in our own skin and through our own beautifully unique soul, work to be a healing presence in the world.

My prayer is that it may be so.