

On Thursday, I participated in a webinar entitled, *Healing What We Carry: Race, Trauma, and Community Life*. It was offered by the PCUSA Synod of the Covenant. Our instructor was the Rev. Alexandra Zareth, who describes herself as “a child of God, a marriage and family therapist, and a board-certified chaplain committed to the reconciliation of people to themselves through intentionally holistic care.”

Ale (*AH-lay*), as she’s known familiarly, began her talk by defining some of the words in the title. She described **Community Life** as a “**relationship where we decide to walk together in mutual support, encouragement, and accountability.**” It’s a nice way to think about making a covenant for how we pledge to be as members together in this church.

Her simplified definition for **Trauma** is - **when one experiences something too much too fast, and that person’s external realities are greater than their internal resources.** Often such experiences can leave a scar on our psyche, and when something reminds us of that event or pattern of behavior it can trigger us to return to the feelings we had when we were enduring it. And unless we engage in holistic practices that help us respond to those triggers, our behaviors might be less than optimal.

She explained that when we are in an intentional community with others it may be helpful and important to contextualize one’s trauma so others in the community may

better understand our reactions. Of course, that takes trust built over an amount of time.

Take the story Anne Marie read for us from Genesis. It ends with what sounds like, at least to me, a put-down by whoever “he” is in the sentence,

13 *Adonai* said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ ... 15 But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

If “he” is Abraham, how did he know she laughed when the narrative tells us “she laughed to herself?” It makes more sense to me that “he” is God, who would have known her thoughts – and her reaction.

Regardless of who “he” is, both Abraham and God would have known of Sarah’s lifelong inability to become pregnant – AND, “he” would have known the trauma she suffered whenever she was scorned. In that culture, a major portion of a woman’s worth was her ability to bear children – especially boys – and Sarah’s infertility would have made her a bit of a pariah. In fact, she is made fun of by Abraham’s maidservant, Hagar because Hagar *was* able to produce an heir for Abraham. After Ishmael was born, Sarah used her power to treat him and Hagar terribly – it was one way for her to have power over her situation – but certainly not the healthiest response!

Once she encountered menopause, the matter was settled; she would never bear an heir for her husband, but at least she could move on. And then, those three strange

men came to visit them. They enjoyed their hard-worked hospitality. And then, they dropped the news that by the same time next year Sarah will have given birth?

Before her mind could respond, Sarah's body reacted – and she laughed. Borrowing from Rev. Zareth's definition of trauma, the information was too big for her internal resources to process. Psychologically, she was overwhelmed:

There was the absurdity of the promise...

There was all the past ridicule and scorn she had endured

Then, there was the wonder of it – she could have a baby?!?

Most likely then came the questioning for how she would handle labor, delivery, and the care of a baby with her body at the age it was.....

On and on and on – there were plenty of deep-rooted feelings that allowed her body one response – to laugh. And to have her condemned for it Forget that!! OF COURSE SHE LAUGHED!

Her body's response to the news was such an important factor in the story that it became the name of her child, *Isaac* – “She laughs.”

It is important for me to make clear that the miracle of Sarah's capacity to become pregnant is NOT the standard for ALL couples who aren't able to naturally conceive a child on their own. This unique occurrence fits specifically into the meta-narrative of the stories of the people of Isaac (Jews) and the people of Ishmael (Muslims) – the stories of Abraham procreating with Hagar and with Sarah are the origin stories for these two major world religions – of course, this would also include Christianity, which is tied to Abraham through the Jew called Jesus of Nazareth.

This is a mythic story, which asks the rhetorical question, “Is anything too wonderful for *Adonai*?” Even in our own lives, when our hopes and aspirations are dashed, God finds other ways to bring joy into our lives.

On the occasion of the celebration of life for Joan Riser, her grandson Michael, Bob’s son, showed us pictures of their beautiful son, whom they adopted when they were not able to conceive a child. Looking at the smiles on their faces - it was certainly a win-win proposition – indeed, something wonderful for their family!

And this is the thing – life is not formulaic. We humans like to impose norms and patterns on life...more so within society. But sadly, when those societal norms aren’t met we can do unto each other cruel things.

Our reading from Matthew tells us that Jesus came to undo the damage we do to one another:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; 38 therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Jesus put a spotlight on the damage those in power do upon those who are their targets. And not just on the individuals who oppress people, but also on the systems put in place that seek to categorically marginalize fellow humans. A careful reading of the gospel instructs us that Jesus healed individuals where he could and helped

them see that no matter what the culture imposed upon them, they were worthy in the eyes of God.

Jesus also pointed out the ways cultural institutions were unfair, and he sought to break some of the unhealthy patterns they had erected. Think about his command to “Render unto Caesar what is of Caesar, and to God what is of God;” or, his action of turning over the moneychanging tables at the Temple during the Passover festival and condemning the religious authorities for “turning my Father’s house into a den of robbers.”

By these examples Jesus was teaching his followers to do as he had done and to follow his way. He knew he would not be around much longer and they would need to pick up his mantle to build up the Beloved Community. When he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest,” he was telling his followers that it was their responsibility to continue to use what he had told or shown them to let people – especially those on the margins – know that they are worthy in the eyes of God.

At the beginning of the sermon I shared with you the definition of Community Life that was offered to us by the Rev. Alexandra Zareth. She described Community Life as a “relationship where we decide to walk together in mutual support, encouragement, and accountability.” At the memorial for Diane Scharnhorst this past Wednesday, Denny Murphy introduced me as the pastor of “Community of Faith Church, next door.” I kind of liked that – for while the church is physically located in Lyndhurst, our ministry extends so much farther than that. (I’m looking at folks from Chesterland and Oberlin, heck, even Western North Carolina.) THIS is our

community ... our “Community of Faith” ... and *we* are Christ’s laborers. When we are willing to be a group who decide to walk together in

Mutual support

Encouragement

AND, accountability.

We can be the people Jesus wanted to send out to those who are helpless and harassed, offering them peace and wholeness ... and above all, assurance that they are worthy of the love of God who is present with them no matter what life is throwing at them.

May we continue to grow into THAT kind of community. Amen.