“Waiting for the Other Shoe to Drop,
Or Overcoming Post-Traumatic Church Syndrome”
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First Congregational UCC, Salem
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Acts 8:26-40
1 John 4:7-9, 17-21

Today’s sermon topic was not conceived through ordinary means; instead its
parentage can be traced back to a night over a year ago when our church held an auction
at the Dine, Drama and Bid fundraiser. I had racked my brain trying to figure out what I
could offer up on the auction block. But having neither a vacation home, nor handiwork
skills, nor culinary talents, I was at something of a loss. Finally, I had a brainstorm—I’d
auction off a sermon! Something I was actually qualified to offer! Dick and Susie
Francois, and Bev Pratt and Jenny Whitmire took the bait, but then I discovered that I
was the one who was on the hook! And so with some fear and trembling, I offer to you
their sermon topic, with this challenging title: “Waiting for the Other Shoe to Drop,”
with the subtitle that was too long to fit in the bulletin: “Overcoming Post-Traumatic
Church Syndrome.” Since this is not a sermon topic for the faint of heart—either to
preach on or, I suspect, to hear, let us enter into it with a word of prayer!

Faithful God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts,
be pleasing in your sight, our Strength, and our Salvation. Amen.

So here is the problem as Susie, Dick, Bev and Jenny put it to me: Despite God’s
best intentions for the church, many people have been damaged by their participation in
Christian churches. The reasons are more numerous than we could name, but some
which they lifted up include: having the “wrong” beliefs about Scripture or doctrine;
being shamed or excluded because you don’t toe the line on some legalistic rules enforced by the church; having a mental illness or a family member with a mental illness and finding the church an unsafe and uncaring place; being in a racial or sexual minority, or having members of your family that are in one of these groups; loving people of the wrong gender; being a woman called to leadership in a church that doesn’t ordain women; and, here is one that affects almost everyone at some time or another: having to wear your church face and pretend that everything is okay when really you are suffering or dying inside, or your marriage is breaking up, or you’re losing your job, or whatever it is that makes you feel inferior to the supposedly perfect people you see around you in the pews on Sunday.

In her courageous memoir, *Leaving Church*, Barbara Brown Taylor offers what might be called a book-long reflection on today’s sermon topic. This brilliant Episcopalian priest, professor and writer left her position as a local church priest because life in the church was killing her. Don’t get me wrong; she loves the church; she’s just found it a bit easier to love and to serve with a little distance. One of the things that drove her from parish ministry was the interminable debates the Episcopal denomination was having in the 1990s—over sexuality and theology in particular. Many of you bear the scars of those debates in other churches. How many people today are the walking wounded from the Christian church’s protracted civil war over human sexuality? How many more are still in spiritual ICU because of blows they took from churches that excluded them for holding so-called wrong beliefs? How many have fled the church altogether because while they still love God, they find that God’s people don’t necessarily love them?
On top of that, even those who fit the correct profile of an upstanding church citizen on the outside will sooner or later crumble on the inside. Taylor writes:

“One thing that had always troubled me was the way people disappeared from church when their lives were breaking down. Separation and divorce were the most common explanations for long absences, but so were depression, alcoholism, job loss and mortal illness….I understood their reasoning but I was sorry that church did not strike these wounded souls as a place they could bring the dark fruits of their equally dark nights.”

And so, post-traumatic church syndrome is a real thing. I have not been immune from it. After wanting nothing more in the world than to serve God as an ordained minister, I too left the full-time pastoral ministry after just two years in the parish for a thirteen year sojourn in academia, where I worked through my own post traumatic church syndrome. Today, I empathize with those who tell me that for the first year or so that they attend our church, they keep “waiting for the other shoe to drop.” It takes at least a year for some to believe that we are for real—that we mean what we say in the UCC and at First Congregational: that whoever you are and wherever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here; that we are a non-creedal Christian church that values your freedom of conscience, and doesn’t ask you to check your mind at the door.

Bev, Jenny, Dick and Susie asked me how people suffering from post-traumatic church syndrome might find a path to healing. Now, I know that some of you, perhaps many of you, have had largely supportive and positive relationships with churches throughout your life. Despite all their flaws, congregations are still amazingly life-giving

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and caring communities—the body of Christ, broken but still feeding the world. And yet, I suspect that there may also be times when the church has let you down—when your trust has been at least frayed, if not betrayed, and when you too might have left church for a season, just to get a little distance. What do our scriptures today have to say to you—whether you are waiting for the other shoe to drop, or just hoping for a nourishing word today that fits your actual life?

A strange story about the Holy Spirit, a church leader named Philip and an unnamed Ethiopian eunuch may light the way toward that path to healing. The story comes from the book of Acts, which tells the history of the emergence of the Christian church following the death and resurrection of Jesus. At the very beginning of Acts, we are told that the preaching of Jesus’ disciples has a universal thrust—bringing the message of the gospel to Judea—the heart of Judaism, then Samaria, on the margins of the Jewish nation, and then to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The story of the Ethiopian eunuch is the first instance of the reach of the gospel beyond its home territory towards “the ends of the earth.” This story of an encounter with a marginalized Jew lays the groundwork for the radical breakthrough to come in Acts—the inclusion of the Gentiles in the early church. But Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch is about a lot more than geography. Although the eunuch was a wealthy and prominent court official in Ethiopia, he would have been considered a marginal and inferior Jew on two counts—he was a foreigner, of course, and one whose dark skin might have made him suspect if not at least an object of curiosity.

But more than that, he was a eunuch—a male who had been castrated, probably before puberty, in order to serve the royal court, and its women, without threatening male
power. Eunuchs carried a double burden; they were viewed as defective males, and at the same time, ironically, stereotyped as sexually immoral. And so the writer of Acts tells the story of a man triply marginalized—due to his ethnicity, his gender identity, and his perceived sexual immorality—a man who in spite of all these marks against him, hungered to understand God’s word and to find in it a word that included even him.²

I love the texture of this story—it opens itself up to our imagination. Can’t you see the road-weary and probably dirty Philip, trudging down that wilderness road toward Gaza—then as now a symbol for the margins of Israel—coming upon this urbane, cultured man riding in a chariot, who, with a high-pitched, almost girlish voice invites him up to ride with him because he somehow senses that maybe this dusty traveler is Spirit-sent. I love how Barbara Brown Taylor describes the scene in her commentary on this passage: “Imagine a diplomat in Washington, DC,” she writes, “inviting a street preacher to join him in his late model Lexus for a little Bible study. The inclusion in this story runs both ways.”³

And perhaps this is the first clue about the path toward healing from post-traumatic church syndrome. We heal from spiritual abuse by refusing to let it have the last word on our relationship with God, and with the help of God, we try to keep our hearts open to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Coming from Jerusalem, the Eunuch may still have been smarting from the indignity of not being allowed into the main part of the temple with other male worshippers, for Deuteronomic law forbid castrated males from entering the temple. Small wonder that the text which is bedeviling him, which he

wants help interpreting, is a text about the suffering servant in the book of Isaiah, one who is shorn like a lamb, one who is humiliated and denied justice. Who is this one, the Eunuch demands to know? As commentator Thomas Long explains, “The eunuch almost surely means, ‘Is this only about Isaiah and his situation, or is this passage about me as well? Is this a word from God for someone else, or is this God’s word for me, today.’”

No wonder the eunuch needed a trustworthy interpreter—and so, today, do we. If you take one thing away from this sermon, remember this: the path toward healing from post traumatic church syndrome doesn’t have to mean throwing away the scriptures and leaving the church—it can also mean recovering the golden thread of love within the Scriptures and finding communities of faith that lift up that thread above all others.

It’s no coincidence that the Eunuch was reading from the scroll of Isaiah—the same book which prophesies that God will recover the remnant of his people “from Ethiopia,” and who promises that eunuchs will be welcome in God’s house and receive a “name better than sons and daughters.” Isaiah’s prophecy offered powerful hope for an infertile man denied entrance to God’s house in Jerusalem. Perhaps each of you, at some point, have felt like an outcast from God’s house, or spiritually infertile, or marginalized because of some mental or physical condition beyond your control. Perhaps you too have dared to hunger for, and even to ask for, a word from God that accepts you as you are.

For those of you who at some point have felt betrayed or let down by the institutional church, the fact that you’re here today means you’ve at some point found your Philip, your Spirit messenger who offered a new interpretation of the Christian faith that included you. And I hope that it means that First Congregational, Salem, and the wider

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4 Long, p. 456.
5 Ibid.
United Church of Christ, has opened up the Scriptures for you in a new way, a way that includes you and those you love.

Philip, led by the Spirit, found a message for the eunuch that bathed his life story in the light of Jesus’ life—the Jesus who was also ostracized by religious leaders but exalted and restored to life by a loving God. Philip embodied in his encounter with the foreign Eunuch the heart of the gospel, revealed in the clearest possible terms in 1 John 4:7: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God.” And for all those harmed by the judgment of the self-righteously religious, 1 John frees us from the paralyzing fear of a judgmental God: “Love has been perfected among us in this,” the writer promises, “that we may have boldness on the day of judgment….There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” Step two, then, on that path to healing from post-traumatic church syndrome? Figuring out who to trust, and the criteria is always, and perhaps only, whether or not they manifest God’s love. “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers and sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or a sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20).

In the UCC we strive to preach the message of Jesus’ radical inclusion and extravagant love. On that wilderness road in Gaza, an unnamed Ethiopian eunuch got the message, and at that moment, he dared to hope—he dared to hope and he dared to ask whether or not this Jesus movement might really, truly, and fully include him. “Look, here is water!” he cried out. “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” “Absolutely nothing,” whispered the Spirit. “Absolutely nothing.”

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6 Ibid., 458.
Towards the end of her book, *Leaving Church*, Barbara Brown Taylor acknowledges the brokenness of the church but sees a path forward. She writes, “If redeeming things continue to happen to us in spite of these deep contradictions in our life together, then I think that is because God is faithful when we are not. When we are able to trust the gospel that our human love of God and one another is the sum total of what we were put on earth to do…then redeeming things will continue to happen, both because and in spite of us.”

Understanding that sometimes we need to recognize that life as we know it, or perhaps church as we know it, is dead, Taylor invites us to hear the liberating message: Okay, “you’re dead. Who are you going to be tomorrow?” And she reminds us: “This is the gospel truth, as true of the church as of her members. All the church has ever needed to rise from the dead is memory, bread, wine and the Holy Spirit—that, and care for the world that is at least equal to her care for her own preservation.”

And so today, my friends, whether you are waiting for the other shoe to drop or happily shod, whether you feel like the Ethiopian eunuch or have the calling and faith of a Philip, come to the table that has been prepared for you from before the foundation of the world. Come to the table of memory, bread, wine and the Holy Spirit. Receive the bread of love and the wine of salvation, for you are surely here because of the Spirit’s leading, and there is nothing, absolutely nothing, which excludes you from this table of grace. Amen.

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7 Taylor, 220.
8 Ibid., 220-221.