

“Core Community”
By Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy
Psalm 23
John 5.1-9
May 22, 2022

What does wellness look like? What does it mean to be well? I think it probably looks a little different to everyone. You might see wellness as being free from pain. Another person might view wellness through a mental health lens. Yet another person might think to wellness as a societal view of peace. Wellness encompasses our whole being - spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental health. If one of these seems off, our entire being can feel unwell.

Not only is our wellness connected within our body but our wellbeing is connected to one another. If one person is disconnected or hurting, we all feel it. If one person is hungry, the entire community can be affected by that unmet need. Many sermons ago I talked about a passage in Jeremiah that reminds us that we thrive when our community thrives, and the community thrives when we invest time and energy into one another.

This past week at the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program in Indiana we talked about healthcare. We discussed end of life care, the healthcare system, the horrible history of eugenics, and how faith communities can care for people who often fall through the cracks of the broken systems. Someone in the group quoted Malcolm X, and that quote has stuck with me all week. Malcolm X said: “When ‘I’ is replaced with ‘we’ even ‘illness’ can become ‘wellness.’” Healing and wholeness happen in community, because our wellbeing is linked together.

Psalm 23 is a passage that is often used in funerals. I think it has something to tell us both in life and in death. There is something very soothing about knowing that God is a Shepherd, recognizing our wants and needs and taking care of us. We can rest easy knowing that our God takes us to still waters, creates a calm environment, and supplies for us so much so that our cup overflows in abundance.

What I think is often overlooked about this psalm is the community. Our faith, especially in America, can become very individualistic. We have personal relationships with Jesus and we seek to better ourselves, but God reminds us that we are in this together. We are to work on our relationships with God, but also with each other.

First, I think to the part in which God creates a table in the presence of the psalmist’s enemies. It could be interpreted that God creates a feast in front of the enemies, and the psalmist greedily eats until stuffed while the enemies go hungry. Though, it makes me question if those that I perceive as my enemies are, in fact, also enemies perceived by God. My human experience has been that those people I have considered “enemies” or “other” are actually just as beloved by God. So, as difficult as it is to fathom, as much as we struggle in this time of civil discourse, or lack thereof, I wonder if this is not to be interpreted as a table in front of one’s enemies, but a table with one’s enemies. God sets this table of delicious foods and invites the person who made fun of you in high school, or the person you made fun of, or the neighbor that put up the opposite political sign as you. What would it look like if we all sat down to a table together?

As much as we come to church to find hope and comfort, we often find out that God leads us to lean into discomfort. A table of people I disagreed with would be completely out of the comfort zone of this introvert. Yet, I also see how the psalmist tells us that God will lead us through the valley of the shadow of death. It doesn't say that God will show us the secret passageway around that valley, but that God encourages us to walk through it. This is more discomfort. This is the wellness God calls us to - doing the brave work of being present in tough situations so that we can find wellness as a whole.

"But, pastor," you might say, "that neighbor who voted differently than me spouts hate. We can't even talk without arguing." I hear you - and I know what you are saying. God isn't asking us to sit down and break bread right away. Wellness in a community doesn't happen overnight, it doesn't happen over spaghetti, it doesn't even happen by the time dessert arrives. It is a process. And I stand before you telling you that I don't have the answer - no one has the answer. Every community right now is trying to figure out exactly how we work together and create wellness. But if we don't start somewhere, the work never begins. So, maybe we start by learning about our neighbors, as I asked you to do a little bit this past week. Maybe we invite them to community events. Maybe we have a picnic with them here by the garden. Maybe none of that works - and it doesn't mean we failed, it means we try a new way, because finding wellness within the community is important. It is worth the effort. It is worth the failures. It is worth trying over and over again.

Perhaps we enter the world as a guest - as someone who doesn't have the answers, who doesn't know everything, and who listens before speaking. We are welcomed as guests at the table, and we are welcomed as guests in faith.

Jesus approaches the pool and the man as a guest - not making assumptions about the situation. Jesus finds a man who is paralyzed by the side of this pool. Many people had heard that the pool had healing powers and traveled from many places for many miles to be healed. This man sits by the side of the pool without getting in, and Jesus asks, "Do you wish to be made well?"

I've heard some say that this is a question that is obvious - that of course he wants to be made well. But I think this is an important question - one of consent and figuring out what the man wanted in life. Did he want to be healed? What was his purpose for being there?

The man responds that he does want to be healed but people keep jumping in front of him. It is helpful to know that in this pool it had to be stirred up for healing to take place. So, it required at least two people for this man to be able to go into the pool - one person to stir up the pool and another to help lower him into the pool. Instead of helping, people are cutting in front of him and ignoring him.

This is the opposite of community. This is the opposite of wellness. As frustrated as I want to be at those jumping ahead, I also realize this is humanity trying to survive because resources are limited. This is what happens when people are forced to choose between healthcare and food, or food and shelter, or any necessity. Humans often do what they feel they must to

survive and cannot see the communal wellness if their own personal needs are not being met. We cannot see that Shepherd providing when we are in survival mode. So, here comes Jesus, who is able to see the community and not be concerned with immediate needs, who offers to help.

We are not Jesus in this passage. Yet, I do see that we have full stomachs and roofs over our heads, so we have the stability to perhaps take a step back once in a while and ask, “What do you need?” We offer to help with those important needs like food. We work with people through the Food Pantry and Community Cafe so that maybe they can pay another bill to make it through the month. This afternoon we have an opportunity to help plant a garden with community members. Perhaps you cannot help today, but maybe there is another way you can give your time or energy.

This is still a relatively new initiative. It is still in the works, with growing support, people figuring out the details, trying to work together. Community organizations are excited to support, but they are still figuring it out. I have heard mixed reviews about the garden. I know trying something new can be scary, but it goes back to moving into that discomfort. We might try it for five years and determine it isn't the right location. We might expand it. But we have to try. It might be uncomfortable. It might also mean just a little extra work. Is the goal to feed people? To build community? To give space? Maybe all of the above?

If you don't have the capacity to help with the garden, that's ok. If you don't have a green thumb, that's ok. Perhaps you support it by word of mouth. Maybe you can tell people about the garden, lead them to it. Maybe you are willing to bundle up some potatoes to pass out at the food pantry.

Of course, there are other opportunities within the community that we can help, too. The garden and food ministries are just perhaps the easiest because they're right here on our grounds. I'd love to hear more ideas you have, more dreams you have for the future of the church and community.

To move to wellness, we have to look beyond our walls. To move to wellness we have to move beyond what is tradition, what is pretty, what is expected. To move to wellness we have to listen to the community. We have to sit at the tables and ask good questions. We must come as guests, ready to learn.

May God welcome us to the table, even among our enemies.

May God place us in discomfort if we have the capacity to do so.

May God move us toward wellness in mind, body, and soul. Amen.