

“In Love’s Service” based on John 20:24-29 and Isaiah 62:1-5

Delivered by Jeff Hamilton on January 19, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

I have always loved stories. From the time I could read, they fascinated me. One of the first stories I remember reading was Robinson Crusoe. I was in the 5th grade, and it pulled me into another world. I don’t remember much of the details of the story, but I’ll never forget how it made me feel. I think I read it two more times, not that I needed to, but I think I did so because of how it made me feel. That world it put me in was one of survival, resilience, and transformation.

I must admit that love of stories shaped my life, leading me to become an English teacher and later a researcher in graduate school, where I studied - What else? Stories, or Narratology - how stories reveal truths about our life and ourselves.

As a teacher, I would often tell my students, “Every story has a hero.” It seems like without fail, at least one student would raise a hand and ask, “Can the hero be a cat?” It always made me laugh, but it also reminded me of a deeper truth: the hero doesn’t always look like what we expect. Sometimes, they’re the last person you’d choose—someone broken, flawed, or unsure of their strength. And yet, they are the ones who seem to change everything.

I remember one year when a student wrote an essay about her mother, whom she said was her hero. She described her mom’s sacrifices and struggles, but what struck me most was how she saw her mother’s perseverance through pain as her greatest strength. It’s a reminder to us that heroes don’t just overcome hardship—they often serve others because of it.

I’m also fascinated by how stories evolve. They’re not just entertainment—they’re tools for survival, connection, and healing. Each of us lives a story, with chapters we’re proud to share and others we’d rather hide. But the parts we often want to skip—the wounds, failures, and struggles—are the ones that carry the greatest potential for transformation.

This morning, I want to explore that idea with you. Our scripture readings, along with a powerful story from Thornton Wilder, yes, the Our Town author, will help us see how the wounds we hide can become the very instruments God uses to shape us and reach others, as we heard in our children’s sermon about the boo boos in life.

Take Wilder’s short play, “The Angel That Troubled the Waters.” It’s inspired by the Pool of Bethesda in the Gospel of John, and it tells of a physician seeking healing for his deep melancholy—what we might call depression today.

In the story, as he approaches the pool, after the waters have stirred and the physician is ready to step in to receive the healing he has so been wanting, the angel stops him and asks an intriguing question: “Without your wound, where would your power be?” The angel continues, “It is your melancholy that makes your voice tremble into the hearts of men...In love’s service, only wounded soldiers can serve.”

This paradox is central to our faith: God doesn’t erase our scars but transforms them into a source of strength and connection. What’s fascinating about Wilder’s story is how the people at the pool saw his wound as a doorway to healing for them. They didn’t see him as broken—they saw him as someone who could uniquely understand their pain and bring comfort to their lives.

Today, we’ll look at scripture—like Isaiah’s promise of restoration and Thomas’s encounter with Jesus’s scars. This can illuminate this truth. In Isaiah, we find a message for the broken. To a people rejected and desolate, God speaks a promise of redemption: “You shall no longer be termed

Forsaken, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her." God's restoration isn't just repair—it's renewal. He takes what seems irredeemable and elevates it, and turns wounds into beauty.

In Wilder's play, the angel reminds the physician that his wound is the very thing that allows him to serve others. Isaiah gives us the same message: our brokenness, when redeemed, becomes the crown of beauty that God uses for His glory.

I often think of the stories of addiction recovery or rebuilding after disasters. Tangible examples of God's promise in Isaiah—that He takes what seems beyond repair and makes it beautiful, not just for the person but for those around them.

This promise of restoration—of wounds becoming tools for God's glory—takes on an even deeper meaning in the story of Thomas. Often labeled "Doubting Thomas," his story in John 20 is not just about belief but about the redemptive power of scars, as Thomas says, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

When Jesus appears, He doesn't chastise Thomas. Instead, He invites him to touch His wounds, saying: "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." It wasn't Jesus's triumphant words or His dazzling appearance that moved Thomas from doubt to faith—it was His scars.

Those wounds, just a few days earlier symbols of pain and defeat, but now they became the very proof of love, sacrifice, and redemption. They bridged the gap between Thomas's doubt and his belief, showing us that brokenness holds the greatest potential for connection and healing.

Consider the story of Corrie ten Boom, a woman who endured unimaginable suffering. One of her most poignant moments came when she encountered a former prison guard who had been complicit in her suffering. He approached her after a speech, extended his hand, and asked for her forgiveness. Corrie recalls how she hesitated. The wounds of her past—the memories of her sister's death, the horrors she had endured—were still very raw. But in that moment, she prayed for strength. Slowly, she extended her hand, and as their hands met, Corrie says she felt God's love flow through her.

Forgiving him wasn't a denial of her pain—it was a redemption of it. Her scars became a testament to the power of grace in action, showing that God's love can work through even the deepest wounds.

This brings me to another short story about Peter Block, a writer and consultant whose work focuses on building community and connections by fostering belonging. In his book "Community: The Structure of Belonging," he goes into communities trying to rebuild and gather a sense of belonging. He does this by asking questions. One of his most profound questions is this: "What gifts are you currently holding in exile?" It's a question that resonates deeply, especially in seasons of renewal.

What parts of your story—your wounds, your struggles, or even your doubts—are you keeping hidden because they feel too messy or too painful to share? And yet, these are often the very gifts God longs to use to bring healing and transformation to others.

What about you? Are there gifts you're holding in exile? Maybe it's a talent you've kept hidden out of fear. Maybe it's a painful story you've never shared because it feels too raw. What if God is waiting to use it yet in ways you can't even imagine?

This week, I want to challenge you to reflect on your own wounds—the parts of your story you've been hiding or avoiding. Ask God to show you how these wounds might be used to serve others.

One of my favorite theologians Dallas Willard once said: "The gospel is less about how to get into the Kingdom of Heaven after you die and more about how to live in the Kingdom of Heaven before you die." And then, take a step of faith. Share your story with someone who needs to hear it. It doesn't have to be perfect or polished—just honest.

Remember the physician in Wilder's play, after he's denied his healing, he turns to leave the pool, and all those around him saw him differently. One who had emerged from the pool newly receiving healing, sees him and heard the angel deny his entrance. He went up to him and said before you leave, "come with me first, an hour only, to my home. My son is lost in dark thoughts. I do not understand him, and only you have ever lifted his mood. My daughter, since her child has died, sits in the shadow. She will not listen to us."

The physician's wound had become his gift. His pain was no longer a burden—it was a bridge to others. Allow God to work through your scars, turning them into bridges of connection and healing. As the angel said, "In love's service only wounded soldiers can serve." And so as Isaiah says, "by His stripes, we are healed," then by our stripes, we are all healers—in love's service." Amen.