

Osler Mennonite – October 18, 2020

Sermon: The Trauma-Informed Church – Supporting people in times of trauma

1 Thessalonians 1-10:

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

The Thessalonians' Faith and Example

²We always **give thanks** to God for all of you and **mention you in our prayers**, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters^[a] beloved by God, that he **has chosen you**, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹For the people of those regions^[b] report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Outline:

- **Land acknowledgement**
 - o We are gathered here in Treaty Six territory and the homeland of the Métis Nation, and seek to honour the treaty relationship as a covenant made before Creator God. We ask Creator's guidance as we work to grow in understanding and friendship, and to address and heal from the issues history has left to us, so that we, our Indigenous neighbours, and all future generations might live in harmony and free of harm.

- Jeremiah 6:16 – **Stand at the crossroad and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.**
 - o Today we are talking about how we can respond to traumatic events as a community – as a church. The Bible provides multiple examples of people and communities in crisis, experiencing harm, being traumatized. The bible also shows us encouragement and examples of how to respond in these situations. The scripture we just heard was a letter of comfort and reassurance to the Thessalonians who were being persecuted because of their faith. This was surely an ongoing, communal trauma experience that impacted that community. The letter was a reminder to them that they were not alone. That they had

people who supported them, and a God who loved them and had empowered them through the Holy Spirit.

- In the Old Testament the prophet Jeremiah, while predicting the exile and trauma of the Babylonians, also offered these words of guidance from the Lord: **Stand at the crossroad and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.**
- (I am going to tell a story I tell much too often now). As many of you know before I started work with MCCS I served with MCC in South Sudan. It was here that I first started to really learn about and facilitate trainings around trauma. So, one day I was in a village. It was extremely picturesque. We were gathered under a huge tree and it felt like the whole village and area had come to hear from the priest and myself and some other church leaders. There were kids and youth, women and men, and elders sitting on wooden benches and plastic chairs. There were birds chirping in the trees. It was beautiful. We were talking about how trauma experiences can get stuck in our bodies and the impact that this has – on ourselves, our families, and our communities. And we were learning about some tools that we could use to release the stuck trauma energy. One of these tools I was teaching was a mind-body exercise. It is very much like tai-chi where you slowly move your body around in repetitive movements. But you are also thinking of things to move out of your body – thoughts and images that aren't helpful, and what you want to bring in. I had everyone up on their feet and we were doing this exercise all together. There was like 100 of us. There was really good energy there – out in nature, everyone thinking good thoughts – it was beautiful. And then someone started yelling at me from the back of the crowd. “Stop stop stop”, he shouted. This elder started to make his way to the front of the group, where I was leading them. And I thought I must have really done something wrong. Something very culturally insensitive. Instead, he said to me and to everyone gathered there, “We know this. We know this. We have a song and dance that says these same things – we want to push out the darkness and bring in the light. Push out the violence and bring in the peace.” Oh! This was one of the most important lessons I've ever been taught - that we know how to heal from harm. Sometimes this knowledge is hidden but we have access to the ancient paths that Jeremiah referenced. The paths that are good and the paths that will lead us to rest. But sometimes we need help getting there. And that is what we are going to talk about today.

- **Introduction**

- I think most of you know me. I work as the Peacebuilding Coordinator for MCC Saskatchewan. And in this role I work to promote peace in 3 ways: by addressing harms we have experienced in the past through trauma awareness and understanding, by promoting healing of harm through restorative justice practices and values (and by supporting local restorative justice organizations like Micah Mission and Parkland RJ), and by engaging in hope-filled relationships that seek reconciliation (an example of how we do this at MCC is our Reconcile podcast which is now releasing our season 2 episodes).

- Of these 3 things – trauma, restorative justice, and reconciliation – trauma is really my passion. While we lived in South Sudan, I kept seeing expat workers, including MCC service workers, leave their positions and jobs early because of ongoing stress and secondary trauma. When we moved back to Canada, I wanted to learn why this was happening and what organizations could do to better protect their staff and their organizational programs. I went back to school and wove this question into much of my academic work – I learned about trauma-informed practices and organizations. I also trained to become a certified trainer in a program from Eastern Mennonite University called Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience. With this training I have worked with MCC partners in Chicago, Afghanistan and Lebanon. I have also done trainings here for many community-based organizations and associations here in the province (which is why some of you will have heard that story that I told).
- So now this morning I am going to try to take some of the ideas we talk about in our trauma workshops and use them to think about what a trauma-informed congregation looks like.

- **What is trauma**

- Let's make sure we are all together when we use this term "trauma". We are going to be mostly working in a head space this morning. Not really getting too deep into our heart space. But if these topics bring up painful experiences please take a break, get up and walk around. If you have something to fidget with or draw with this is helpful. Studies have shown that when talking about or listening to hard things doing something with our hands can help the feelings often associated with trauma, or those hard things, not linger as long in our bodies.
- Trauma comes from the Greek word "traumat", meaning wound. One definition reads, "Trauma is a deep wound that happens when something shocking, painful or harmful occurs and leaves us feeling overwhelmed and threatened. Trauma can be physical, emotional, mental or spiritual."
- Tara Brach, a trauma specialist explains it as, "Trauma is when we have encountered an out of control, frightening experience that has disconnected us from all sense of resourcefulness or safety or coping or love".
- Once I asked a bunch of MCC workers how they would define trauma and one person said, "Trauma is the stuff that keeps me up at night. It is what I absorb from the people I work with who have experienced the first-hand trauma."
- I would also like to add that trauma is often thought of as an individual, one-time experience but that it can be experienced as a community, organization, it can be cumulative events, it can be vicarious, historic and/or systemic.
- Sometimes we make the mistake of assuming that certain events will automatically be traumatic. But this is not true. It is not the event but rather the experience and effect on the person that indicates whether an event is traumatic. What you might experience as traumatic, I might not.
 - An example: When I was in university my brother, sister and I all lived in Winnipeg. One Christmas holiday we were driving home to Saskatchewan and the weather was bad. We hit some ice and went into the ditch. We were all

safe. But for some reason it was an experience that got stuck in me. That, for many years, when I drove in winter, I had to consciously calm myself down so that I wouldn't be overwhelmed with anxiety. The experience didn't have the same effect on the other people in the vehicle. This is how trauma works in our lives.

- The final thing I want to say about trauma is that powerlessness and lack of control are core to a traumatic experience. I recently heard the term "power wounding" in reference to trauma. And so when we think about being a trauma-informed church – these two elements, power and control, will need to be addressed.
- One more thing! Traumatic growth! It is so easy to get overwhelmed by the negative impacts of traumatic experiences. But there is a study that shows that up to 80% of people believe they are in a better space after processing and healing from trauma. They see themselves as stronger, more capable, more adaptable, and more resilient. And they are! The key to this study is that these people transformed their trauma. Many people have talked about how when trauma is not transformed it is transferred, when it is not healed it is passed on to the people around us and to the next generations – creating a cycle.

- **Window of Tolerance and COVID and community care**

- I was supposed to come do this with you all in April. But then COVID. But really, how much more relevant is it to talk about trauma now?
- I don't know about you, but the last 6 months have been hard for me! Trauma specialists refer to everyone's "window of tolerance". I like to think of it as a sliding window. The window of tolerance is the amount of life stress and surprises we can handle or at least tolerate. Everyone's window is open to different amounts and that amount, the amount we can tolerate, can change throughout our life. For me, I normally have a pretty wide window of tolerance. I have fairly good support systems in place, I've worked hard at building up my resiliency, I've had experiences that have shown me I am a strong and capable person, I am highly privileged as a white, educated, employed person with a stable housing situation. So when life throws me difficulties I can usually tolerate them. Can you think of times in your life when you were able to handle difficulties and stress better than at other times in your life?
- But when COVID hit and other life stresses happened and suddenly my window narrowed. Things I have been able to handle in the past became hard – I couldn't meet deadlines, I couldn't sleep well, I got anxious, depressed, I isolated myself. I knew what was happening. When I couldn't decide what we should have for supper I would throw up my hands and say, I can't – my window is too small to make any decisions now. I hated it when we were asked, "How are you doing?" at our more-regular-than-normal-because-of-the-pandemic work zoom meetings. Should I list off the laundry list of traumatic symptoms I knew I was experiencing as a lay curled up in bed with my laptop? I usually just said, fine. For me, this time of COVID has been traumatic.
- The thing is, and almost all of my research has supported this as well, when we are in most need of help from the effects of trauma, we are least likely to be able to seek out help. This is one reason why trauma becomes cyclical and why it is transferred.

- In these moments the advice to practice “self-care” does very little move us into a space of healing. What I advocate for is that we start to talk about communal care, collective care, community care. Because in times of trauma we can not do the work of care alone.
 - One afternoon this summer as I sat in the sun with a warm breeze blowing, I realized that it was time I took my own advice, for once! I sent messages to a group of friends asking if they could check in on my regularly. I gave them a check-in schedule, I told them to make sure I didn’t just say I was fine but to name and talk about my emotions, I told them I needed to feel less lonely. And slowly, my window of tolerance has begun to widen again.
 - Being a trauma-informed organization or congregation means we, as a community, are taking responsibility to ensure that people have a space for healing, especially when they cannot get to that space on their own. It means we are like Paul, Timothy and Silvanus and we are checking in on our friends. Especially the friends we know, or think are having a difficult time.
- **Trauma-informed Congregation**
- How can you become a trauma-informed congregation? As I tell most organizations, you already are doing so much of the work that is needed to be trauma-informed. Simply by the nature of who you are.
 - **How to be a trauma-informed church (follow these 4 Rs):**
 - 1. **Realize** the widespread impact of trauma on those being served within the church and those who the church might be serving
 - Trauma is pervasive. A study done by a healthcare provider in the States in the 1990s found that 2/3 of the participants who were largely white and middle-class had faced adverse childhood experiences such as neglect, abuse, or household difficulties. The researchers weren’t even looking for this type of data in their study and they were shocked at the prevalence of traumatic events that the participants had lived through as children.
 - One example I use of acknowledging the reality of widespread trauma is by giving a land acknowledgment that talks about harm that was experienced on this land.
 - 2. **Recognize** the signs and symptoms of trauma in the men, women, and children it serves as well as the effect living with a traumatized family member has on all family members and relationships
 - Normally in workshops we take time to talk about how trauma looks in our lives. We don’t have time for that today, and I think you probably know a lot of the signs. But I have handout if anyone would like one.
 - 3. **Respond** to the needs of its congregation and community by integrating knowledge of trauma into the planning of ministries, policies, and stewardship of the church's resources
 - We need to normalize our experiences of hardship. We also need to put in place policies that promote safety, choice, collaboration, trust, empowerment and cultural/historic/gender understanding.

- I also have a handout about these things.
- 4. **Resist Re-traumatization** of victims that can occur when recognition of trauma is not combined with compassion and de-stigmatization of mental health treatment. This must also be taken into account in reporting of abuse procedures.
 - This one is so important for the church to consider! I have heard of so many people who have experiences of spiritual traumatization. Where people are wounded from situations or teachings that happen within the church that make them feel powerless, with no control, and with no choices of how to change the harm that they are enduring.
 - Therefore, key to resisting retraumatization is making sure people have power and choice over what they are experiencing within the church. One church who spent a whole year integrating trauma-informed practices and understanding in their church realized that the culture of greeting people with hugs was triggering to people within the congregation. They worked at normalizing many different forms of greeting with each other and added the practice of consent into the physical greetings.
 - In a few weeks I will be doing a webinar that highlights some of the resources that MCC has regarding abuse response and prevention that will speak to this point directly. If you can't come to the webinar please look on our website: abuseresponseandprevention.ca

- **Building Resilience**

- The church can be a beautiful space to build and nurture resilience. Through rituals, symbolism, routines, full mind-body-emotion-spirit centred worship together we can create really strong foundations that carry us through the times when our window of tolerance becomes more narrow.
- A trauma-informed church works to increase people's resilience through:
 - 1. Social networks – is everyone at Osler Mennonite connected to other people?
 - 2. Knowledge and skills in problem solving – does Osler Mennonite promote or teach these skills to its people?
 - 3. Belief that hope and meaning can grow from tragedy – said another way, the belief that there is something larger than us, that we are part of something bigger. Does Osler Mennonite walk with people in this understanding?
 - 4. The ability to recognize signs of stress in one's body and the tools to address this stress before a crisis occurs – does Osler Mennonite recognize signs of stress within itself as a congregation?
- Are there other ways you are building resilience amongst each other? How are you preparing for the times of hardship?
- My own belief is that the Creator does not want me to suffer. That the Creator made me with the knowledge of those that came before me of how to grow and thrive, even in hard, traumatic spaces. I believe that the Creator puts people in my life to increase my

resilience, to continue to build a firm foundation, to break cycles of unhealed trauma, and to pass on this understanding.

- To finish I want us to pray together a simple prayer with some deep breathing (another amazing tool to ground people in times of trauma): Take a deep breath in and pray (in your head) We come to you. And breathe out and say Seeking Rest. Let's do this three times.
- In Isaiah we hear the Lord say to us: I have created you and formed you. You are precious in my eyes. I honour you and love you. Amen