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St. Mark's Episcopal Church
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Lent3/Year C
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A couple of months ago, Steve Gaddis died. Steve was my former teacher, colleague, and good friend. Steve was 59 years old. He died of lung cancer, though he did not smoke. Friday, I had a good conversation with Ashley, Steve's wife. She, and the two children, are making their way forward with the help of family and many friends.

Steve was on the faculty of the Salem Center for Therapy, Training, and Research, in Salem, Massachusetts. He later founded the Narrative Therapy Initiative, a community that has been and will continue to be important to me.

In 2002, I took an 18-month residency in family therapy at the Salem Center. I chose the Salem Center because of the center's grounding in postmodern therapies. I was searching for a new foundation for my work. Cracks had formed in my former Neo-Freudian orientation.

At the Salem Center, under Steve's tutelage, I came to know the work of Australian Michael White, the co-founder of narrative therapy. I took a one-day seminar with Michael White sponsored by the Boston College School of Social Work. I witnessed, in technicolor, so to speak, the manner in which Michael White worked with people. Michael, like Steve, died young and suddenly in 2008.

During the seminar, Michael showed a video of a therapy session. Michael had been called in to consult with the client, Chris, and her therapist, Margaret. Michael interviewed Chris, the client, while Margaret, the therapist, sat quietly.

Chris was in severe crisis. Chris's daughter recently had been sexually assaulted. Chris's daughter's trauma released memories of Chris's own sexual abuse. Chris's father abused Chris when she was a young child.

Michael questioned Chris about her abuse. Michael tentatively, respectfully, followed his curiosity to find any part of Chris's story that might represent a pinch of defiance, a dash of resilience in the throes of the abuse.

Chris remembered a married couple next door. Chris remembered that she often visited them. Chris said that the man and woman were very kind to her.

Chris remembered that the man next door and her father got into a fight. Chris remembered that she imagined at the time that the fight had to do with the man confronting her father about the abuse. Chris said that she remembered feeling safer, more secure, knowing she had been stood up for.

Chris remembered that after the fight, her father built a fence around the house. He forbade Chris to visit the neighbors. Chris said to Michael, "The bastard."

Michael asked Chris what it was like for her not to be able to visit the couple, what she missed about not being able to see them. Chris talked about how much she loved to be with the woman in the woman's garden. Chris said, "I love to garden, too."

Michael asked Chris what she imagined the man and woman felt when they could no longer see Chris. Chris said that they must have missed her, that they might have been sad, that maybe the woman missed having Chris visit her in the garden.

Michael asked Chris what the couple must have thought of her. Chris said that they must have liked her. Michael asked Chris what the couple's feelings said about her as a child. Chris was able to say that she was a likable child, a good child.

Michael asked Chris the names of the couple. She could not remember. Michael asked Chris if she would like to give the woman a name. Chris teared up and said, "I would like her to be Aunt Mary. She is Aunt Mary." Soon Chris, Margaret and Michael were crying.

Chris and her therapist Margaret now had a thread with which to begin to sew a handkerchief of hope, then possibly a shawl, maybe even a quilt.

In today's gospel story, Jesus gave those near him, the shamed and tossed aside ones, a thread of hope.

Jesus told "sinners" to repent—sex workers, tax collectors and the likes, those named and marginalized as untouchables by the religious authorities.

Now, what does a call to repentance have to do with a thread of hope? Sounds more like a seam stitch of demand.

Once again, we are called to peel the veneer of morality off the heart of Jesus.

For Jesus, repentance wasn't about being "good." Repentance was about reorienting one's relation to God. Jesus did not get ginned up about those near him cleaning up their act. There were plenty of preachers who were more than willing to bark at "sinners" about purity. John the Baptist comes to mind.

Jesus passionately encouraged those whom the temple had storied into uncleanness to hear new stories about who they were. Jesus invited "sinners" to turn around to another story of their lives, stories about freedom from religion's back hand of judgment.

The new stories Jesus invited "sinners" to hear and receive sound thin and fragile in comparison to the dominant discourses they heard for most of their lives. Jesus beseeched them not to assent to a barren assessment of their beautiful lives.

Jesus, in a brief parable, offered his followers another season to thicken the story of their belovedness: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 'Lo these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig around it and put on manure.'"

Jesus, with the heart of God in his hand, aerated and fed the ground beneath his flock. The followers of Jesus came to an emerging sense of themselves as new people.

Lent calls us to repentance. Lent invites us to reorient our relation to the heart of God. Not easy. It is difficult to turn our beleaguered selves around to a better angle of regard, given all the grimacing faces of God that compete for our attention.

I propose a tender, simpler face of God. Say, the face of Chris's Aunt Mary, as Chris and Mary worked the soil for another season.

Who has sewn a thread of hope across your heart, especially when the sting of shame has wounded your heart, either lately or a long, long time ago? Kneel again before those with whom you felt beheld and beloved. Imagine how you will arise. Imagine what new direction you might take, and with whom you might travel.

Amen.