

SERMON FOR JULY 23, 2017

Margaret Trudeau is not the woman she was 15 years ago. Then she struggled with her mental illness in relative silence. Now she is open about her struggle. She has written about her life. She speaks to others about her journey and has worked to bring mental health into the public discourse. What was once her private brokenness is now a source of inspiration and healing. We call this the redemption of suffering.

Theo Fleury was a skilled hockey player in the NHL. He suffered for many years with trauma associated with childhood sexual abuse perpetrated by a junior hockey coach. His pain was expressed in excess-with alcohol, drugs, and gambling. It took decades of personal agony and lost relationships before he, by his own confession, hit rock bottom. Only then could he begin to release his pain and begin to heal. Now he speaks about his life and raises awareness about the evil of abuse and the hope for recovery. He is living the redemption of his suffering.

There was a short period in my life when I really owned my last name, Grieve. I was diagnosed with cancer and had radical surgery before my first year of ministry was over. Three weeks later, my father died. In the next years after that, my marriage ended and I lost my job at Five Oaks. There were a lot of painful endings in a rather compressed period of time and the pain of those losses was agonizing. It took years of spiritual direction and some significant

time with a good therapist to own the pain and to grow from it. To be totally honest, I am still on that healing journey.

I have thought long and hard about these losses, the losses that took away comfort and forced me to find my own courage. I have found some truths about myself that make me a better minister than I was before this loss-life happened. For one thing, I am not afraid of death. I have made friends with death and that offers me the chance to be compassionate and present when people around me move from this life to the next life. When I say that love is stronger than death, I mean it because I have lived it.

I have grown braver in myself because I had to. I have had to trust my own person because there was no one else to make decisions, to parent my son, to take responsibility for my life. A friend of mine once said about herself, "I don't look back. It is not the way I am going." Those words have become my truth.

Loss has been my teacher, my spirit-shaper, the crucible for my becoming. And it has made me a better minister, more open, more willing to speak up and to risk. After all, I have faced worse. My work now is the redemption of my suffering. Most days, I am grateful for it,

I tell you these stories as a way to understand today's scripture and as a way to honour your struggle and the struggle of the world. My hope is that they will bring you hope.

A similar theme to these more modern stories comes by way of Matthew's parable of the wheat and the weeds. I am setting aside the huge question raised in the bible story of how the weeds got into the wheat field. The enemy is the weed planter, according to Matthew. Now if this enemy is our shadow side, I can see and agree with that. If we understand the enemy as an outside source of evil, we need to think hard about that. So, I am leaving the identity of the weed planter for another time.

I want to focus on the farmer's decision to let the weeds grow until harvest time. The rationale is that some of the crop might be pulled up if the weeds are pulled up too soon. I wonder about this. Most gardeners are pretty clear about what they are growing.

I see the wheat field as a metaphor for our lives. In our life-time wheat fields, we find the life we are growing, the good, the gifts, the capacity for love and right relationship, the desire for peace and justice, the ability to care for creation and for community. In our wheat fields, we find faith growing and spirit becoming. And our life work is to nurture the gifts we have been given and the good we have chosen.

Because we are human, we sometimes forget our gift and our good. We choose away from our potential. Sometimes we make poor choices. Sometimes we are not strong enough to hold on. Sometimes life dishes pain and brokenness and we are left to cope with loss that we did not ask for. These are

the weeds in our life-time wheat fields. They are our challenge, our burden, our sorrow, our problem to deal with.

The weeds offer us a choice. No matter what the weeds are or where they have come from, they give us opportunity to grow. We can sorrow our losses and we can heal our sorrow. We can own our mistakes and seek forgiveness. We can open ourselves to those who hurt us and try to find forgiveness and future. As we deal with the weeds, they can become the source of new life. Broken hearts can mend. Wisdom can grow from suffering. Health can replace heart-sick worry and anxiety. Transformation is possible. Simply put, weeds become wheat. Suffering can be redeemed. We call this resurrection, the Easter way Jesus showed us.

I don't know exactly how this happens. I only know that it does. I also know that the redemption of suffering is not easy, but the rewards are enormous.

Yanking out the weeds in our life-time growing space leaves a tidy wheat field. But it removes the possibility for redemption and it takes away hope. Today Matthew urges us to a new courage and a new hope. Leave the weeds. They are the stuff of transformation.

Just ask Margaret Trudeau. Just as Theo Fleury. Just ask me.

