

**Sermon: Bookshelf Gems: #1 The Wounded Healer Text John 13:1-17 August 4, 2024
Rev Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church Ottawa ON**

Part of the movement towards retirement for people in my profession is dealing with books. My conversation with retiring colleagues inevitably turns to books and what to do with them.

A friend, recently retired, set the ambitious goal of reducing his library to 300 books. Not sure he made it... I don't have a specific goal for library downsizing, but I have been working on it for a while.

A few years ago the Region's Licensed Lay Worship Leaders were meeting at our church and Elizabeth and I were given the opportunity to offer surplus books to them. They may have been surprised by the number of books we offered them.

We have placed a good number of books on the counter in the upper hallway, offering them to anyone who would want them.

In Elizabeth's now empty office we have box of books set aside for the next Licensed Lay Worship Leaders gathering... The downsizing continues.

Some books do not hold their value. Could I interest you in a study of church demographics for the year 1995?

When I was a student, I would scrimp and save to buy Biblical commentaries, to do the exegetical study that would inform sermons. Now really great material is found for free online. Commentaries are not in demand.

Some books may have particular value to the one who has them on their shelf. Some books, some authors have great impact.

This morning I would share one author re encountered from my bookshelf culling – a writer from a few decades back whose thoughts still resonate.

Henri Nouwen was a prolific writer, authoring 39 books on psychology, pastoral ministry, spirituality, social justice and community. I was surprised to learn that I have 13 of his books, a proof of his influence on me I guess.

A Dutch RC priest, he moved to North America, spent 10 years teaching at Yale Divinity School, then on to Harvard. His final years were spent at the Daybreak Larche community in Toronto.

I had breakfast with Henri Nouwen once -sort of.... I was on a retreat at the Sisters of St John the Divine Convent in Toronto, and so was he. I looked up from my oatmeal to see him taking the chair across from me. But it was a silent retreat so I could only whisper hello and offer a quiet word of admiration. 😊

Nouwen's most famous books include *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, a reflection on Rembrandt's painting of the parable, and of the story Jesus told. It made the list of the 100 best Christian books of all time.

Here is one nugget of wisdom from Nouwen's writing that I am grateful for...

A few years ago I went to a seminar on time management. One of the things that was emphasized was the need to work free from interruptions. Interruptions, we were told, reduce productivity. Interruptions break concentration, disrupt energy flow and derail creativity. The course recommended finding ways to eliminate interruptions. Interruptions take you away from your work.

On the other hand, Henri Nouwen, in one of his books on ministry, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, suggests that ministers are in the business of being interrupted.

In ministry, in life, whatever we are doing... we may have our agenda, our "To Do List", our scheduled calendars, things that really need our attention. But then, the phone rings...or someone comes to the office door...or a text message pings. An interruption: the needs of someone, a crisis in someone's life intrudes on your day and you can throw the planned agenda away. You have to spend time on the interruption.

Interruptions, Nouwen says, are not to be avoided. They may be a blessing. They might be an opportunity for grace. They may be the most important part of your day. Those are wise words

Perhaps Nouwen's most influential book is the Wounded Healer- which proposed that our own woundedness and struggle can be a gift we offer when helping others in their times of need.

In Christian community we don't so much offer expertise to someone in need, but solidarity, and compassion. It's our common shared humanity and our shared woundedness that is the greatest gift we can offer.

Some 30 years ago, Nouwen wrote an essay in a Toronto church newspaper, reflecting on a theme like the one in Wounded Healer, and I no longer have it but I recall it well. He took today's Gospel, the story of Jesus washing his disciples feet as inspiration.

He pointed to Jesus insistence in the gospel story that his follower let him kneel before them. He draws attention to Jesus directive that his followers are not just givers of care but that to give care they must allow themselves to receive care.

Nouwen suggested that we are stronger in community when we can be open about our struggles with one another. In that sharing, strength and healing community may be found.

We have two AA groups that meet at Rideau Park. AA is a healing community, where sharing stories of struggle is encouraged. Strength is found in the sharing of what might otherwise be kept hidden

In the past we have offered Grief groups that can help people who have suffered loss to connect to others who will understand their experience of loss.

As Leonard Cohen wrote.... There is a crack in everything that's how the light gets in...

In the spirit of Nouwen and his Wounded healer model, perhaps it's helpful to lift up that as Rideau Park goes through a time of transition, so do its caregivers, so did Elizabeth, so do I...

While I am certain that the timing of my retirement is right, it's also hard to separate from such a blessed community after 24 years of deep connection.

In a book not written by Henri Nouwen called *Running through the Thistles*- a book about concluding a pastoral relationship - the author encourages pastors to see, and to attend to, the grief felt in their congregation - and to also see their own grief. Acknowledging our own grief can help us to not have it get in the way as a relationship concludes.

Retirement for me brings the promise of new patterns, redirected energy, new possibilities.... And it is the same for you at Rideau Park. There is grief that comes with the ending of things.... But then hope of new life in what is come...

We will move through this time of change together.

Amen