

Pastoral Prayer: I am indebted to David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine Brother, whose words inspire part of this prayer. Let us enter our time of prayer through the prayer of our Lord for his disciples, as John reports:

“I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. ²¹I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. ~ JOHN 17:20-21 (NLT)

God, Holy Trinity: Three and yet, mysteriously, One; Your Son, Jesus, prayed that Your church be One as You and He are One; but Christians have not been united as He prayed.

We isolate ourselves from each other and fail to listen to each other. We have misunderstood, ridiculed, and even gone so far as to attack each other.

In so doing we have sinned against You, and against all who have not believed in You because of our scandalous disunity.

**God, Holy Trinity: Three, and yet, the mysterious One To whom from different paths Each of us has come. To whom on different paths each of us go:
Make strong in our hearts what unites us.**

Build bridges across all that divides us; United make us rejoice in our diversity. At one in our witness to your peace, make us a rainbow of your glory. Amen.

Oscar Pistorius was born with no fibulas in his legs. His legs were amputated below the knee before he was a year old. He went on to become the first double leg amputee to compete in the Olympics. Was he cured of his missing legs? Of course not. Was he granted a new form of wholeness? Absolutely.

Frequently we confuse “being healed” with “being cured.” Being cured is related to something we remember fondly—a restoring of the way things used to be. My arm is broken; make it like it was before. Our relationship is damaged; restore it to the old equilibrium. Our society is in shambles; take it back to the forties or the fifties or wherever our memory creates a utopian golden age.

In my observation, the healing of brokenness in our lives and relationships is not so much a matter of restoring things to the way they were before as it is the creation of something new.

For that kind of healing to happen, we first must embrace our current brokenness. The people Paul addresses in our epistle readings had taken that step. Listen:

<p>EPHESIANS 2:11-17 (NLT) <i>Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called “uncircumcised heathens” by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts. ¹²In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. ¹³But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For Christ himself has brought peace to us.</i></p>	<p><i>He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. ¹⁵He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. ¹⁶Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death. ¹⁷He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from him, and peace to the Jews who were near.</i></p>
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“(Christ) broke down the wall of hostility that separated us.” The specific healing—the new form of wholeness Paul addresses in today’s epistle—is from disunity and enmity between peoples of different ethnicities and spiritualities. It would be difficult to deny that human society has reconstructed those same walls of hostility. Many are centuries old; we just keep inventing new excuses to justify them. Most of them have become politicized, which adds additional layers to the hostility.

I invite you to focus with me today on churches that claim existence in Christ (I assume that’s all of us). If in our churches, these hostilities continue unhealed, that’s evidence that it’s not Christ who is guiding, but instead, human created tests of faith and fellowship, ostensibly intended to identify who is a true Christian, but more frequently identifies who is not.

Christ died for all; but creeds and doctrinal statements and ecclesiastical pronouncements, bottom line, are about who can and who should be excluded.

I used to be a night owl. I watched late-night TV where people offered me cures for my receding hairline. I even tried Rogaine for a while (obviously, it didn’t work); but, mostly I never

expected my baldness to be *cured*; on the other hand, I do think it's been *healed*—not because I miraculously grew a new crop of hair, but because I can embrace my relative baldness as a part of me.

I can still see Mr. Rogers: gentle smile, staring into the TV camera day after day saying, "I like you just the way you are." Healing begins with embracing our current condition. The old hymn says, "Just as I am, without one plea..."

That doesn't mean we should stay "just as we are." A wonderful 1960s poster said, "God loves me just the way I am; but God loves me too much to leave me just the way I am." And a children's song says, "He's still working on me!"

Only when we embrace where we are can we allow God's healing Spirit to draw us into the next steps of the journey toward what God has created us to be.

The journey. Our problem here is that we're a destination-oriented culture attempting to live out a faith that is journey-oriented.

When we went to serve the church in Las Vegas I had an old GPS in my truck. It was fine, unless there'd been changes to the streets in the previous seven or eight years. Well, Vegas is a growing city, and the streets are constantly under construction. More than once my GPS, which I lovingly called, "Maggie", sent me on wild goose chases, and had me hopelessly lost.

I have a good sense of direction if the sun is out (which rarely was a problem in Vegas); and I usually check a map before I set out for parts unknown; so I'd just keep driving in a general direction until "Maggie" finally recognized a street in her ancient programming; and sooner or later I'd hear her say, "You have arrived."

Folks, we have not yet arrived; and as long as we remain on this side of the grass, we will not have arrived. Christian faith is a journey, and on any given day, at any given moment, some of us all the time, and all of us some of the time, will be following an outdated or faulty Spiritual GPS on a path that does not lead effectively toward our intended destination as imitators of Christ.

And in those moments, if we look around, we'll see others who are on other paths. If in those moments we insist that our path is the only correct path, the end can hardly be anything other than walls of hostility.

"But, my Bible says..." Really? Your Bible? There's only one Bible. The problem is in us: in the way we read and understand it. And, limited as we are by the clay of which we are made, none of us has the wisdom to understand the ultimate truth of the Bible. Paul says, "We see through a glass darkly" (I Cor. 13:12)

But few are willing to accept that limitation; and if we insist that everyone follow the path we've chosen; if we insist that God do things the way we would do things if we were God—if we insist on establishing the standards by which God should act—if we insist that God "fix" things like we want them fixed—insisting that our limited vision of Scripture is absolute, it's likely we also will be disappointed and disillusioned. And it's likely we'll miss the healing we need

and desire.

You see, healing is always a miracle, and while it's not something we control, neither is it something we receive passively. It is a process in which we participate. There's a wonderful verse in Isaiah 35: *"For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, streams in the desert; the burning sands shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water."*

Our eldest grandson and I love hiking together. We've hiked mountains and we've hiked deserts, and while none of those desert hikes were long, they were long enough to remind us that we were in a desert! So, I can relate to Isaiah's words. I know what it means to wish God would make a spring burst forth.

Will God do it? Not in our experience; however, God has given us the intelligence to know to carry plenty of water. The expectation of God's help is no excuse to be passive.

So, how can people of God participate in their own healing while also being an instrument of healing in a broken society? It can begin by offering true hospitality—we recognize and accept that in Christ God has broken down all walls of hostility, and if we live in Christ we cannot live other than extending hospitality to each other, and to people of other ethnicities and spiritualities and personal orientations. All means all.

Hospitality's not easy. David Lose, Preaching Professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, says: "Let's face it: Hospitality means being patient and polite while we wait for newcomers to become more like us. But can we understand hospitality as a willingness to be open to the distinct gifts and perspectives of someone who is different? Can we even imagine that hospitality is openness to receiving people who are different from us as gifts of God given to change us and stretch us?"

What a concept! We, the control freaks of Western culture placing ourselves in a position, with no dividing walls of hostility, not so that we change everybody to become like us, but in a position so that we may be the ones who are changed?

I don't know. I don't think it's ever been tried. But, it sounds like a new form of wholeness to me. It sounds like being healed.