

**A sermon preached by Mary Scalzi at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on April 7, 2024.**

ATTUNEMENT

John 20:19-29, Psalm 133, 1 John 1 - 2:2

There is a word in the field of psychology that is becoming more and more main stream even though it has been around for quite awhile. The word is attunement. We can probably imagine what the word means because it contains the word tune. To tune something is to bring it into harmony. Is your instrument tuned? Is the choir singing in tune with each other? I don't feel in tune with my partner today. But harmony doesn't fully grasp the active nature of the word attunement as applied to psychology and the psychology of relationships. Attunement is an active word. A piano doesn't just come into tune, something has to be done to make it tuned. In relationships, attunement means the reactivity we have to another person. Emotional attunement is the process of recognizing and responding to the emotions of another person in a way that validates and supports their experience. And in some ways allows that person's experience to impact us and our actions, too.

What better example can we find of the word attunement than of Jesus in our passage today in John and in the way he handles Thomas, and validates Thomas's experience.

There is a whole body of research around the practice of attunement. I do not pretend to be a psychologist or expert on this subject by any means. You can read all about it for yourself. But, one psychologist, Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk in his NY Times best-selling book entitled *The Body Keeps the Score* devotes a chapter to the relationship between trauma and attunement. And not to oversimplify, but he explains how the effects of relational trauma can either be minimized by the presence of attunement, or worsened by its absence. He explains that in trauma situations, extremely distressing situations – emotionally, the physical brain is actually being changed in the way it regulates fear and stress responses. But, attunement practices can reverse the damage and change and rewire the brain once again in positive ways.

There is an acronym given for the word attune in attunement to help demonstrate what it means. (from the Gottman Institute)

ATTUNEMENT:

A = Awareness, or active listening

T = Turning Toward. (rather than turning away from)

T = Tolerance.

U= Understanding.

N = Non-Defensive Responding.

E = Empathy.

As I read this familiar passage in John's gospel about Thomas, that takes place after the death and resurrection of Jesus, a really traumatic experience for his disciples, the story becomes less to me about a doubting Thomas and more about an attuned Jesus.

A Jesus who exemplifies attunement. A whole week had gone by since Jesus had first visited the disciples in the upper room, when Thomas was not there. It makes me wonder, why didn't Jesus just get on with ascending? But, he comes back to the upper room. He is aware that Thomas needs more. He is actively listening in his time between his resurrection and his ascension. When he had come the first time to the upper room, he had let the disciples see his hands and side. But with Thomas, he lets him touch them.

Thomas is struggling. And, Jesus does not simply say, you should not feel this way, or be this way, you should just believe. He turns toward Thomas, he understands. Who knows what struggles Thomas has had in his life leading up to this moment of Jesus' death. Had others left him before? From where did Thomas' trust issues arise? For at the root of Thomas' struggle, he is surely having an issue with trust. He was not trying to be difficult. He was not trying to be a doubting pain. He truly was struggling. We all know what it is like to struggle – with our emotions, struggle with the ability to trust when trust has been broken, to struggle with something that – *we just can't accept, but we know we have to accept it*. It is not fun to struggle. In fact, Jesus himself says, blessed are those who can believe without seeing. Blessed are those who do not struggle.

The word here for blessed is very interesting. In Greek it is makarios (ma-kar'-e-os). (I am not an expert in Greek either:) It is a really interesting word because it is not a word that indicates a sort of reward for good behavior, or like you are going to be blessed because you did that good thing. Oh, you could believe without seeing. That's great! It is rather a word that carries the meaning of hitting the mark, being on a contented path, being happy, like blissful, having a harmony with self. A sort of opposite is sin, harmatano—to miss the mark, to miss the path, to be out of harmony out of the path of love and trust. Those who are in harmony with self, others, God, because they can trust means they are free from the struggles that result from trauma or a lack of love. Blessed are those who are able to function in a loving attuned manner. That is a blessed position to be in.

Yes, blessed are those who do not struggle. Wouldn't we all like to not struggle. Like in today's Psalm, how very good and pleasant it is when people dwell together in unity. The image of the dew running down Zion, the tallest Mountain in Palestine, watering a dry mountain, being compared to the oil of life running down Aaron's head, down his beard, down his body, over his collar, just saturated. An image of being saturated, physically with blessing—same word makarios, life forevermore—harmony with self and others, trauma free.

But living in this blessed state is very rare. Remember the story of the centurion, in Matthew chapter 8. He is famous for the words often repeated in the Roman Catholic church before taking the eucharist, "only say the words, Jesus, and I shall be healed." The centurion was a military leader, a leader of men. When Jesus entered the man's city of Capernaum, the Centurion came out to meet him, and appealed to him saying that his servant was at home paralyzed and lying in terrible distress. Jesus said, I will come and cure him. The Centurion said, no need to come, only say the word and my servant shall be healed. And, the servant was healed. But, remember what Jesus said—such faith, such trust is rare, in fact Jesus had not seen the likes of it in anyone in all of

Jerusalem. The way the word blessed is used in this story, and in our story with Thomas, is more like what a blessed state it is to be in when one can trust easily. We don't know all the experiences the Centurion had had prior. But, he seems to have had harmony with self and others. He was certainly attuned to a simple servant's needs.

When Jesus says to Thomas put your finger here on my palm, don't just see it, and actually place your hand here in my side, the physical nature of that healing opportunity for Thomas is amazing to me. Jesus rewired Thomas' brain, his heart, his being, in that moment. And he wasn't just doing it for Thomas, he was doing it for all of the disciples, to heal their pain and reverse the effects of trauma. Because later in the letter of John, John says we are telling you about "What we have heard what we have seen with our own eyes and we have beheld and touched with our own hands," this is what we are sharing with you. The disciples had to grasp who they were. And, Jesus was attuned to how difficult this whole experience was for them. And, Jesus was, and is still, doing it for us, too. Sometimes we need real physical antidote to our pain.

Attunement is a learned behavior and it can be taught. Jesus showed us how to do this time and time again. Think of all of the times that Jesus actively listened, turned toward someone, understood, was non-defensive and showed empathy. The woman at the well needed validation amidst her scornors, let the little children come unto me when others wanted to turn them away, his mother's need for wine at the wedding – validating people's emotional experiences in a non-defensive way. Jesus opens the way to change human behavior forever; he spells out what love is he shows us and demonstrates attunement. But, we can see all around the world that we are slow to learn it. Active listening to ourselves, our children, our communities, whole people groups.

I love that Thomas did not hide his truth. Because with traumatization there is often an inability to share it, or it becomes hidden and we do not even realize it. But Jesus shows we can deal honestly, openly, with help. This passage invites us to come honestly to Jesus and let ourselves be rewired. I love the way Jesus spent time after his resurrection before his ascension, demonstrating attunement to what the disciples had been through. His treatment of Peter and allowing repair for the rupture in their relationship. Coming at Peter three times to meet each painful moment of Peter's denial. Do you love me, Peter, do you love me, do you love me? The way he actively listened to the disciples on the road to Emmaus to hear what they were feeling before he revealed himself to them.

And we can do this for ourselves, for our children, for generations of hurting people. To reverse a lot of pain in the world. Jesus invites us to "Put your finger here, place your hand here." "My Lord and my God" is all Thomas can utter as the healing washes over him.

May we allow the Holy Spirit to wash over us as we practice attunement with ourselves, in our families, in our communities, and may it spread to the world. Amen.