

Spiritual First Aid for Wounded Brothers

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Men's Ministry Dinner First Presbyterian Church San Antonio

September 26, 2021

The inspiration for my offer to participate this evening was Gardner Peavy's "Good News Moment" presentation in worship on April 25th of this year, where he highlighted a "True Men's Ministry" with organized leadership, a budget, scheduled events such as tonight, a multigenerational weekly gathering called "The Tribe", small Authentic Manhood Groups, and age-appropriate contacts. During my presentation I will also praise other effective programs and resources at First Presbyterian Church.

I am eternally grateful to Christian Medical & Dental Associations (CMDA) through its ministry to motivate, educate, equip, and encourage Christian physicians and dentists to take the healing ministry of Jesus Christ to their patients, colleagues, and communities. CMDA assists in changing the heart of healthcare by changing the hearts of doctors and by leading others to a personal faith in Christ. I am an example of their success.

CMDA notes that 85% of Christian physicians and dentists were raised in the church and came to faith in Jesus before the age of twenty. I am a late arrival. As you will soon hear, I came to know, love, and trust the Lord Jesus 23 years after my graduation from medical school at the age of 47. CMDA played a significant role in my salvation saga.

The original First Aid Course twenty years ago was titled "Spiritual First Aid for the Wounded Healer" where I was the guest speaker at a regional CMDA weekend conference. The purpose was to address major spiritual and life challenges in the medical and dental professions that result in higher rates than the general population for divorce, depression, addiction, and suicide.

Over the years the format of the course was modified for specific audiences to include CMDA groups, medical schools, hospital staff meetings, medical county societies, and medical specialty meetings at the local, regional, and national levels.

The First Aid Course is in three segments:

Inventory — To know thyself and to identify your own woundedness

Awareness — Identification of the wounded brothers or sisters in your midst

Action — Three levels: engagement, strategic outreach, & emergent intervention

A formative quote for the course is from Catholic priest Henri J. M. Nouwen in his book "The Wounded Healer": "In our own woundedness, we can become a source of life for others. Identify the suffering in our own hearts and make that recognition a starting point — to be open with our minds — because we heal from our wounds."

In the didactic portion of the course, there is a major focus on topics to enhance self-awareness: cultural heritage, spiritual genealogy, genetic endowment, family of origin, major life events, and current circumstances.

Many concepts are explored, namely:

Evaluate all aspects of health: spiritual, physical, relational, and emotional health

Identification of impact events in life

Have significant issues been resolved?

Specific recommendation of the benefit of professional counselors asking:

Are you on a sound foundation?

Do you need a tune-up?

Do you need an overhaul?

Do you need assistance with conflict resolution?

Do you need to engage in confession, repentance, and forgiveness?

Do you have any issues of unforgiveness of others or of yourself?

Tonight, we will bypass the didactic portions and proceed directly to the case study. I am that case study.

I am not from these parts. I am from “Up East” — way “Up East” in New England. I am blessed to be married to my wife Marian who is a life-long member of First Presbyterian Church.

I am the second oldest child in a Catholic family with eight children where Catholicism had significant ritualistic and cultural importance. However, no mention was made of a loving God or of a personal relationship with Jesus.

When I was 12 years old, my mother died in childbirth due to human error with the delivery of the eighth child. The family unit was maintained through the assistance and sacrifice of two dynamic women — my paternal grandmother and a paternal aunt. These women had powerful, positive effects on me with their love and commitment. I developed strong, positive relationships with each of them. There was also tremendous support from the family of one of my mother’s younger sisters who lived on Long Island who had 7 children. Their family raised the baby for his first three years.

I share with you one of my heart’s greatest sorrows is that for decades I did not identify or seek help for the psychological wounds from the tragic death of my mother.

Shortly after retiring from clinical medicine, Marian asked me to attend a fund-raising event for a local mission of which I was unaware: The Children’s Bereavement Center of South Texas. I gladly escorted her to the luncheon. Its mission with powerful, compelling testimonies to treat childhood traumatic grief pierced my heart and I grieved. Such a ministry would have been so valuable for our family after the untimely death of our mother.

In 2016 their 20th Anniversary Legacy of Hope Celebration honored and thanked our Pastor Louis Zbinden for his involvement and support. I also salute our church for the recent implementation of the GriefCare program.

I came to understand much later in life that one of my coping mechanisms to connect with my late mother was related to her Catholic faith. I became an altar boy and knew the Mass in Latin. I was a practicing Catholic up until the middle of medical school at Georgetown University, which is a Catholic institution. I did not meet Jesus there. It was during the late 1960s when the Vatican II Council changed everything. This led to me no longer be a practicing Catholic.

I was significantly blessed to complete my education debt free. I earned a full ROTC scholarship for my undergraduate degree. I attended medical school on active duty and the Army also covered tuition, books, and fees. In return, I agreed to serve seven years of active duty as a physician. It was an equitable arrangement and I would do it all again in a heartbeat.

In the Spring of 1969 during my sophomore year of medical school, I fell in love with a schoolteacher named Charlotte from the Midwest who lived in my neighborhood in DC. There were so many aspects in which we were balanced. Due to circumstances in her family, we were married in less than 6 months in a liberal church in her hometown. There was no premarital counselling. In retrospect, this was a major error.

Our two daughters were born during my internship and residency. After residency I was stationed at Fort Carson Army Hospital in Colorado Springs. I was extremely fortunate to serve all seven years of my commitment at Fort Carson.

Church became a priority when our two daughters started school and we joined a liberal United Church of Christ congregation. This was also a major error. Families within our community of friends that joined First Presbyterian Church Colorado Springs had marriages that endured.

After fifteen years of active duty, I resigned from the Army and entered a new private practice in Colorado Springs which was profoundly successful.

In my early 40s, on the surface, I had the appearance of significant personal and professional success. In reality, the foundation of my world was unstable. I felt a deficit in the home of attention, affection, and appreciation as my wife and daughters zoomed along in their lives. I was disgruntled and abused alcohol when not on duty. I did not seek help. My wife, our daughters, our circle of friends, and professional colleagues were unaware of my significant vulnerability. I did not have any relationships with accountability.

Around the time of my 40th birthday the two important ladies from my family of origin died of natural causes. In retrospect they were both significant accountability influences on me. Until that time I was a faithful husband and an honorable father.

When faced with significant temptation, I committed adultery. The trajectory of my life drastically altered. After the initial infidelity, I had an extramarital affair. I confess that I destroyed the marriage and family through divorce. I had become a prodigal. I had a series of compromised relationships and significant misadventures the next five years.

Charlotte and I collaborated and cooperated raising the girls. They graduated from high school and then graduated from college in 4 years in areas that provided gainful employment. They were married at the ages of 22 and 26. Each had four children. A few years after the divorce, Charlotte dated an executive with the USA Hockey division of the US Olympics whom she eventually married.

At one of our meetings during our separation prior to the divorce, Charlotte stunned me by saying: "Fred, I forgive you for all that you have done to the family. I ask forgiveness for my contributions to the failure of our marriage." This was very confusing for me given my emotional state and my libertine lifestyle. It took me over two decades to discover and to comprehend how the Lord worked in the lives of Charlotte and the girls.

Sibling number seven in my family of origin moved to Colorado Springs in the early 80s. She was the first of three siblings to come to the Lord. She married a man she met at church and they both had careers at the large Christian ministry Focus on the Family. Shortly after my departure from the family home, they visited Charlotte with love and compassion on their hearts. The evening culminated with Charlotte accepting Jesus as her Lord and Savior.

Charlotte then participated in the renowned First Presbyterian Church Colorado Springs Divorce Recovery Workshop. Congratulations to First Presbyterian Church San Antonio for the DivorceCare ministry and specifically to Butch Gerfers who leads the program.

The girls came to know Jesus as their Lord & Savior soon after through Christian friends and a prayer group at their high school led by a youth pastor from a growing evangelical church in town.

This is the beginning of the third portion of the First Aid Course: Action – Three levels: engagement, strategic outreach, and emergent intervention.

You see, I was the wounded healer and my Christian brothers & sisters were aware of my vulnerable situation. They came to my rescue. The relationships, interactions, advice, events, and gifts are too numerous to count. One the one hand, there were many interactions, experiences, and gifts that did not hit the mark. One the other hand, there were so many that were on target and that were phenomenally effective. I share this to encourage everyone to reach out with the love of Jesus whenever and wherever possible. We may never know this side of heaven which of our interactions have been effective. We are called upon to make the effort.

My salvation was the result of the love, patience, and prayers of my daughters, my partner & his family, and a multitude of other loving & concerned Christians. The culmination was a rapid succession of Divinely timed events over three months.

When I was at a low point emotionally, I sought counsel with a psychologist whom I had known socially and professionally. He greatly assisted me in thinking clearly, in regaining my bearings, and in establishing priorities. He was a former Catholic priest who fell in love with a parishioner and left the priesthood to marry her. He was a likeness of Mr. Rogers as played by Tom Hanks in the 2019 movie "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood".

At the close of the first session, he asked, "Fred, where are you spiritually?" I responded, "Pretty dead — empty — lost". At that point we established my spiritual health as a top priority. Another top priority was to rebuild loving and trustful relationships with my daughters. One of my greatest regrets is that I did not have the awareness or the humility to seek professional counseling until that time.

As an act of fellowship, I was invited by a medical colleague to a breakfast at a fancy downtown hotel to hear renowned Dallas Cowboy Coach Tom Landry. I was highly impacted by his personal testimony and his salvation saga. He shared remarkable faith and perseverance in the face of family tragedies and illnesses. It turned out that I was the eighth person at a table with seven Christian physician colleagues. This event is similar to The Gathering of Men, which is now the Alliance of Men, here in San Antonio.

My younger daughter invited me to attend Parent's Weekend where she was a student at Oral Roberts University. It also was Homecoming Weekend and the 30th anniversary of the school. My experience was extremely confusing as I was truly an alien in a foreign world. This immersion in a healthy, vibrant, loving Christian environment revealed the magnitude of the deficits in my spiritual life.

I then visited my older daughter at her university in California. Over the weekend, we connected at a newfound spiritual level. She introduced me to contemporary Christian music and we attended an evangelical church called the Vineyard.

My partner was not only a consummate fisherman, but also a fisher of men. When he and his wife sensed that I was in spiritual transition, they were on alert for action. They sensed that the hook needed to be set and they did not want to let me get away. When I asked permission to stay at their condominium in Vail to ski with my younger daughter for her Spring Break, they abruptly rearranged their schedules to be with us. The three of them were adept in guiding the conversation. We spent two days skiing, sharing, praying, and exploring God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Bible.

They invited me to join them in worship when back in town. It was there that I heard a simple, gentle message on "Jonah and the Loving God of Second Chances". At that moment I accepted the Lord Jesus as my personal savior.

I had come to my senses. I was a new creation. In retrospect the event of my salvation was not a colossal leap of faith in that the Apostle's Creed was already on my brain because of the Catholic indoctrination of my youth. Now it was also on my heart!

My partner introduced me to the leader of the "New Believers" class at church and I attended the full 6-month course. He was a PhD biologist, my age, and the Chairman of the Biology Department at the Air Force Academy. We connected at a deep level.

A Family Medicine specialist colleague called me and invited me to a leisurely Saturday breakfast and a gentle hike on the grounds of the castle called Glen Eyrie, which is the international headquarters of The Navigators ministry. We met on a precisely scheduled weekly basis in his office for personal updates, spiritual progress, and scripture memorization.

Since its founding in 1933, The Navigators has upheld the mission "To know Christ, make Him known, and help others do the same." With 2,800 U.S. staff serving in 50 countries, The Navigators focus on developing disciples person-by-person-by-person and encouraging spiritual growth across the stages of life. The introduction to The Navigators world was one of the most profound Divine interventions in my saga.

My partner also said, "Fred, my week is always better when I attend a men's Bible study and prayer group led by the senior pastor that meets at 6:30 AM every Wednesday. I want you to join me."

All three of those activities were Divine gifts in their timing as they provided me with basic training, focus, and fellowship early in my new walk as a follower of Christ.

Lastly, at the end of worship one Sunday my partner stated that he needed to visit with me and that he would like to come to my home at 5 o'clock. He came right to the point and said, "Fred, I love you and I care about you. You have an alcohol problem. You are a drink away from disaster". It was Divine timing to get my attention.

Although I came from a hard drinking family and I was abusing alcohol, I had never had a DUI or an alcohol related incident at work in that I was very disciplined. Not only did he confront me — admonish me — with love and respect, but he also provided a specific resource in the form of an "Overcomers Anonymous" group that met every Tuesday evening at the church. He even provided the name of the leader and said that he was expecting my call.

Later that evening I called a psychiatrist friend whom I met in the Army and was now also in private practice. He was of Jewish heritage and was raised on the East Coast. He was firm in his direction and his clinical manner was like the psychiatrist played by Robin Williams in the movie "Good Will Hunting" with the persona of Alan Arkin. He provided the medication Antabuse for me and met with me weekly for months.

He also facilitated a “Group Therapy Intensive” weekend in Santa Fe, New Mexico that was phenomenal in the process of healing from the unresolved grief over the death of my mother.

I participated in the 12-Step program weekly. They facilitated Step 9 which is a face-to-face meeting with individuals who were harmed by my alcohol abuse to make amends. There were three separate meetings for Charlotte and each daughter as there was only one guest allowed per meeting. These events contributed greatly to healing my relationships with each of them.

I then sold my private practice and successfully returned to active duty with an assignment as senior faculty at Brooke Army Medical Center. At the last Bible study in Colorado Springs the brethren prayed over me. The senior pastor also gave me a specific referral to the senior pastor of Wayside Chapel which was a significant blessing. He immediately connected me with the elder singles group and with the men’s ministry.

After nine months in San Antonio, Marian and I met on a blind date. This Divinely inspired connection changed the trajectory of my life. Marian divorced in her 20s and had a son the same vintage as my daughters. She was a successful businesswoman and was not looking for a long-term relationship. She considered me a project for Southern hospitality and offered to be my Texas tour guide. On the third date on a Friday night, I mentioned that I could not be out late in that I had a 7 AM meeting the next day. She found that odd and probed until I revealed to her that it was for a large breakfast of Wayside Chapel’s men’s ministry with a prominent guest speaker.

In a startled manner, she said, “You’re a Christian?” She then shared that in her teens she aspired to be a Christian missionary. She lamented that she wandered away from the church after her divorce and that her career became her idol.

Awhile later, Marian remarked that she would like to attend Wayside Chapel with me. She then asked me to worship with her at First Pres where she was warmly welcomed back. Within two months in response to a sermon titled “Homesick for Heaven” she was back in the arms of Jesus.

We fell in love, as I successfully transferred to the medical center of my OB/Gyn residency training in Tacoma, Washington. When we married, Marian retired from her career in telecommunications and joined me in Olympia, Washington.

We soon will celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary. We thank the Lord our God for the Divine introduction on the blind date. We daily thank the Lord for all the blessings bestowed upon us. We each learned from the mistakes of our pasts. We are indebted to all who invested in our relationship and who prayed for us.

In the three locations where we have lived, we joined healthy, evangelical churches and have partaken of the Christian Education, Men's, Women's, and Couple's ministries, all of which have born much fruit. We also have participated in the CMDA's Marriage Enrichment programs and in Focus on the Family's programs.

Lastly, when it was evident that counselling for individuals or couples was needed, we sought and found excellent therapists in each location.

I salute First Pres Marriage Ministry with focus on three specific categories: Premarital, Marriage Enrichment, and Struggling in Marriage. They also are training Marriage Ministry Mentor Couples.

It is important to salute our church for the inclusion in the Congregational Care Ministries encouragement to address mental health issues. The church partners with STCH Ministries Family Counselling. They provide counseling once a week at the church and are also able to utilize other counselors within their network virtually throughout the week. Our church also supported the National Alliance of Mental Illness free 'Pathways to Hope' conference at the Tobin Center.

There are two books that had significant impact on the health, stability, and enjoyment of our marriage.

The first book is "The Covenant Marriage" by Doctor Gary Chapman where he reveals the keys to marital growth that are found in the Bible: your relationship with God enhances your marriage relationship and communication is the primary vehicle by which two persons become one in the marriage relationship. The idea of biblical oneness involves not only physical intimacy, but also intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and social oneness. The covenant marriage program encourages Christians to exercise the promises and expectations of God's covenant love in marriage. Practicing Covenant Marriage means couples must offer each other steadfast loyalty, forgiveness, empathy, and commitment to resolving conflict so as to encourage each other in spiritual growth.

Congratulations again for First Pres involvement with the San Antonio Marriage Initiative and for the sold-out all-day conference with Doctor Gary Chapman in September 2019.

The second book that was especially helpful in navigating blended families, was "Boundaries" by psychologists Doctors John Townsend and Henry Cloud.

When I completed my 20-year Army career, I rejoined my former partner in private practice in Colorado Springs. I was invited to join a Physician Prayer group that met the first Saturday morning each month. This was not a Bible study. It was a combination of spiritual group therapy and accountability. All were CMDA members. The transparency and vulnerability were profound. We had the capacity for instant communication and to call special meetings for urgent issues. And not only were we all part of each other's lives, it was a core social group for Marian and me.

After just over four years in Colorado Springs, I was offered the position at CHRISTUS Santa Rosa here in San Antonio as an OB/Gyn specialist in the renowned Family Medicine Residency program. The mission statement was “To extend the healing ministry of Jesus Christ” which they implemented powerfully. The eight years there comprised the best chapter of my clinical career. The move to Texas was a tremendous blessing as I soon came to realize that Marian was much happier in her homeland.

We’ll conclude with confession, repentance, forgiveness, and the burden of unforgiveness of others or of self.

One January Sunday, Marian and I heard a sermon on the sanctity of life and forgiveness. The pastor said that if you have ever been involved in an abortion, to “confess your sin and God is faithful and just and will forgive you your sin and protect you from all unrighteousness.”

I confess to you this evening that in the 1970s I performed abortions.

That morning I was immediately whelmed with that stark reality. A coping mechanism in dealing with my sin was to develop a selective memory deficit. I had psychologically suppressed the memory of my role as an abortionist. I had absolutely stuffed it. I had proudly kept track of every delivery in my career. However, if you asked me how many babies I had aborted, I would not have a specific number. It was in the hundreds.

From 1967 to 1971, I was a medical student at Georgetown University in Washington DC. The prevailing cultural mantra was that an early pregnancy was “A clump of cells” “Just tissue” or “Nothing more than a blob of flesh”. Ultrasound and doppler devices were not available to demonstrate the truth that abortion stops a beating heart.

Tragically, I saw an 18-year-old from the suburbs die at DC General Hospital from complications of a criminal abortion. I also knew where early, safe, illegal first trimester abortions could be obtained at upscale OB-Gyn practices.

In January 1973 the Supreme Court ruling of Roe versus Wade stated, and I quote:

“We need not resolve the difficult question of when life begins. When those trained in the respective disciplines of medicine, philosophy and theology are unable to arrive at any consensus, the judiciary, at this point in the development in man’s knowledge, is not in a position to speculate as to the answer.”

Because the Supreme Court would not speculate as to the beginning of life, they decreed that abortion was not against the law. It was a private matter between the pregnant woman and her physician. It is important to note that the Supreme Court ruling did not make abortion a constitutional right! Abortion — the elective termination of a healthy pregnancy — rapidly became an accepted medical procedure. I was a resident in OB/Gyn and willingly participated. I did what I thought was right in my own eyes.

After my residency at Fort Carson Army Hospital, abortion on demand in the first trimester of pregnancy was the standard of care. I also worked for Rocky Mountain Planned Parenthood performing abortions for additional income.

The turning point for me was when Congress passed a law that prohibited abortions in government hospitals or at government expense. The hospital commander also directed that I no longer work for Planned Parenthood. At the time I was unaware that this would mark the end of my role as an abortionist.

The pastor also directed to “confess your sin to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed”. My community of faith rose to the occasion and helped me navigate the turbulent emotional and spiritual challenges.

On the one hand, I am ashamed of the man and the doctor that I once was. On the other hand, confessing sin brings glory to God and brings us closer to Him. I am so blessed to be where the Lord has led me, assured of His forgiveness through the blood of Jesus. I am so grateful that “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!” Truly, Amazing Grace!

After retiring from the Army, when it became known that I was an abortionist in the past, I was encouraged by CMDA and Focus on the Family, to share the transformation that happened in my life and in my heart and in my soul. I have been blessed to incorporate the sanctity of life lectures into the residency program and at the medical school. I have recently travelled with CMDA leadership to share the sanctity of life presentation at eighteen medical schools in Florida, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas.

I have been blessed to be the featured speaker at Pregnancy Care Center Galas ten times in Texas and in Colorado. It is deeply meaningful to see what God is doing with these powerful grassroots ministries. I share with you also that based on my transparency, there are numerous opportunities in the healing process of women, men, families, and others in medicine in dealing with their participation in abortion.

Praise and appreciation are in order for First Presbyterian Church’s Kingdom Resource Laboratory which includes the pro-life ministry ‘Any Woman Can’ and provides free state-of-the-art OB ultrasound.

I share with you that I understand that my sins have been forgiven by the blood of Jesus. I also share with you that it has taken me years to forgive myself.

The Lord is still with me in the healing process. Recently I heard a sermon on the 51st Psalm. Later that week during my daily devotions, I meditated on the psalm and was specifically impacted by verse 14:

Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,
you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

Precisely, the Lord has delivered me from the guilt of my past and I am using my tongue to proclaim His righteousness. This verse has taken me to a higher level of peace in my heart.

Lastly, at the end of the sermon on the Sanctify of life Sunday, the pastor closed by asking if we have forgiven ourselves. He then added, "Is there anyone in your life for whom you hold the burden of unforgiveness?" It was only then, close to four decades after the death of my mother in childbirth due to human error, that I realized that it was time to forgive the doctor. I had maintained animus towards him. When I was in high school and college, I worked in the same hospital where he practiced. I had been told that he was a changed man after my mother's death. So that morning I forgave him.

So, ask yourselves, "Is there anyone in your life for whom you hold the burden of unforgiveness?"

In closing, I encourage you to review your spiritual journey and identify anyone who was instrumental in your spiritual health and growth, so that you can acknowledge and thank them.

Praise and appreciation for all the First Presbyterian Church provides for spiritual, emotional, and relational health.

Go in grace and peace. May God bless you all.