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Spiritual Massage Therapy

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on
 The Second Sunday of Advent, December 5, 2010

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 The Church in the Circle
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A few years ago, right around this time of year, I got my first massage. To date, I've had two massages in my lifetime and both were gifts from my wife who, I suppose, thought they would be good for me. The first massage was right at the beginning of the season of Advent, so at church we were preparing to get into high gear for the holiday season. I guess Amy thought that a massage would help me to relax and get into a good frame of mind as we began all the Advent preparations for Christmas.

Now, to tell the truth, getting a massage is not something I would have thought of on my own. As some of you know, I grew up in New Jersey, and guys from my neighborhood in New Jersey don't get massages. Guys from my neighborhood get together to play pick-up basketball, we get together to shoot some pool, or we go out and get some pizza. To be honest, I don't think "getting a massage" was even part of the vocabulary where I grew up. I can't imagine the amount of ribbing I would get, if I told a bunch of guys from my neighborhood that I couldn't hang out with them because I had an appointment to get a massage.

And yet that is precisely what I did a few years ago. And to be honest, I was kind of nervous . . . you know . . . a new experience . . . a complete stranger . . . getting a massage . . . I'm from New Jersey . . . you get the picture. But, I must say, I was greeted very warmly by a smiling, well-scrubbed, middle-aged woman, who said she was going to be my "massage therapist." I turned that phrase over in my mind . . . massage therapist . . . massage therapy. It had an interesting, clinical ring to it. And it sounded a lot less threatening than the simple word "massage." "Massage therapy," I repeated to myself. It couldn't be too bad. I could handle this.

Then my "massage therapist" told me to go into the room, to take off all of my cloths, and to lie face down on the table. And I got even more nervous. Taking off all your cloths and lying on a table, even when you are modestly covered by a sheet, causes a little anxiety. But, I said to myself, I'm a scholar, a theologian, and this is nothing that a little theology can't handle. We are made in the image and likeness of God! We praise God because we are fearfully and

wonderfully made! Our bodies are temples of the Holy Ghost! If this body is good enough for God, I tell myself, it ought to be good enough for me as well. Theology to the rescue! Right?

Wrong! It didn't work. The fact of the matter was that I was lying face down on a table covered by a sheet. I felt uncomfortable and awkward and vulnerable.

My massage therapist, who I must say was a complete professional, came in and got to work. At first, she seemed to be doing some exploratory work. She seemed to know how to find those places where my muscles were knotted and tense, places that I didn't even know were knotted and tense. Not too bad, I thought. Kind of nice. Sort of relaxing.

But then, after this initial exploratory phase, this nice, well-scrubbed, middle-aged woman somehow changed, and she began to hurt me. She dug her strong fingers into my knotted and stressed out muscles, and pain shot through my body. In a soothing voice she said things like, "it feels like you're a little tight here," and then she dug deeper into the knot. The pain was both excruciating and exquisite, and for the better part of an hour she subjected my stressed out and tensed body to massage therapy.

It is hard to describe this experience. First of all, it really did hurt. When she dug her fingers into a knotted muscle pain seared through my body. But mixed in with this experience of pain, there was the deeper experience of my muscles loosening and becoming unknotted. So as I was lying there, with my lovely massage therapist boring into my muscles, I found my body relaxing and being released from the grip of tensed and stressed out muscles. At the same time I was saying ouch from the pain, I was also experiencing sweet relief from my tortured and twisted muscle fibers. By the end of the massage, I felt wonderful. It was a painful process to endure, but in the end, my seized up and knotted muscles were relaxed and unknotted and I felt like a new person.

On her way out, my massage therapist told me to drink a lot of water during the next twenty-four hours in order to flush the toxins out of my system. My initial thought here was, "Ick!" Decades of toxins being released into my system. Not the most pleasant of thoughts. I must've drunk gallons of water that day!

In our Gospel lesson for this morning, we meet John the Baptist. And this morning I invite you to think of John as your "spiritual massage therapist." John the Baptist was many things. He was a first-century apocalyptic Jew. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets. He was the forerunner of Christ. But today, on this second Sunday of Advent, let's think of John as a spiritual massage therapist.

I say this because every year, at this time, the church in its wisdom requires us to confront John the Baptist, reminding us that Advent is not Christmas, but a time to prepare for Christmas. Traditionally, Advent has been a time in which we examine our lives, and examine all the ways we have turned our hearts and minds away from God, a time when we try to clear out all the spiritual trash that is cluttering up our lives. The idea of Advent is that we are preparing for the coming of a very special guest: we are preparing for the coming of the Lord into our world and into our hearts. As John says to us, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths."

And to prepare the way of the Lord is a serious spiritual undertaking. Now I don't want to be a Grinch. I like the tinsel and the trees and the carols as much as anyone. But there is a deeper meaning of Christmas, and Advent asks us to prepare for it. So in Advent we ask: How can we prepare the way of the Lord in our world and in our hearts today? If God is love, then what are those things that are keeping God's love at bay? If God's spirit is the spirit of truth and goodness and beauty, what are those things that getting in the way of God's spirit in the world? If God desires human beings to live in harmony and peace, then what are those things that keep frustrating these desires?

And when we ask these questions, there is John the Baptist waiting to greet us, saying, “Hello, I’m John, and I’ll be your spiritual massage therapist. Take off your clothes, wade into the water, and feel yourself naked before the very eye of God. I’ll be right in, and we’ll get to work. And we’ve got a lot of work to do.” And there are his rough, prophet’s hands ready to dig into the twisted and knotted fibers in our spiritual lives. Under the Baptist’s hands, we feel the pain of having the spiritual knots in our communal and individual lives identified and worked on. Has anger over some past injury got your soul in knots? Has malicious gossip torn the spiritual tissue that connects us one to another? Are you still nursing an old grudge against someone that is causing you to cramp up? Has consumerism got you feeling spiritually stressed out? Have fear and prejudice caused knots of hatred and intolerance to form in the body politic? The strong hands of the Baptist are ready to perform a deep-tissue massage on all the things that are blocking the coming of the Lord. It is a painful, but necessary process.

Yet, even in the midst of the pain, in the midst of the searing in our souls, there is the sense in which we are being relieved, released from the tensed and twisted fibers of our anger and our fear and our prejudice. As we undergo spiritual massage therapy, the toxins that were polluting our system are being flushed out in the waters of baptism. Every year, in Advent, we are invited to lay down on John the Baptist’s spiritual message table, and to undergo his treatment. It is difficult to undergo, but in the midst of it, we may find ourselves feeling like new men and new women.

Advent is the season when we prepare for the birth of the Prince of Peace. It is at its deepest level a joyful time when we prepare for the coming of the Lord, when we make straight his paths. It is the time when we try to welcome the presence of God’s kingdom of justice and compassion and peace into this world. It truly is a message of good news for the whole world.

But there are many things that are still blocking the ways of peace and compassion in our hearts and in our world today. Things like anger and fear and injustice. To prepare the way of the Lord, to make straight his paths, we may all need to undergo a little spiritual massage therapy. This Advent, like every Advent, John the Baptist is at the ready, his strong, prophet’s hands waiting to work on the twisted and knotted fibers in our souls and in our society. At one level this spiritual massage therapy may be painful. But at a deeper level, we may experience this process as sweet relief, we may feel like we are being transformed into new men and women, and we may feel, when Christmas comes this year, that we are prepared for the coming of the Lord, into our world and into our hearts once again.