

Healing Scars with *Amipotent* Love: Reflection on John 20:27 & the Vietnam War

Steven Joseph John Bruening, April 21st, 2026

“Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” John 20:27

Healing spiritual wounds starts with the willingness to look directly at the marks of our history without flinching or turning away in shame. When the disciples encountered the risen Jesus in the locked upper room, he did not appear to them as a pristine or untouched figure. Instead, he came bearing his scars as a bridge between his suffering and their belief. As recorded in the Gospel of John 20:27, Jesus offered his pierced hands and side to Thomas with a specific invitation: *Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.* This act signifies that resurrection does not erase the trauma of the past but rather transforms it into a sacred testament of survival. This point was beautifully inspired by a sermon by the Rev. Hannah Quick at my church, Mt. Washington Presbyterian Church on Sunday, April 20th, 2026 (thank you, Hannah for a powerful sermon!). For those of us who carry the weight of displacement and war, these scars are not just physical, they are the deep soul wounds that occur when our sense of identity and belonging is fractured by forces beyond our control.

In the presence of such deep injury, the human spirit often cries out for a divine power capable of unilaterally undoing the damage. However, my friend Thomas Jay Oord offers a more realistic and compassionate perspective in his work on the theology of an amipotent divinity. Derived from the roots for love and power, amipotence suggests that God is not a controlling force who allows suffering for some hidden or mysterious reason. Rather, Oord argues that because the essential nature of the divine is love, divine power is inherently noncoercive and noncontrolling. This means that God cannot unilaterally heal our soul wounds or halt the violence of war without the active participation of creation. God is always doing everything possible to bring about healing, but the Ever Loving Creator requires our cooperation to manifest that restoration in the material world.

Healing is therefore a collaborative act where we reach out to touch the wounds of others. In this way, we mirror the disciple Thomas as he reached toward his friend and mentor, the risen Jesus, and in doing so, we become the physical hands of a God who works through love rather than force. Reverend Quick suggests that in this sacred act, Thomas acknowledged the immense pain and trauma of his friend, the fully human Jesus who had experienced rejection and desertion by his closest companions alongside the gruesome physicality of a Roman crucifixion. By reaching out, Thomas tells Jesus he is present and will linger for as long as Jesus needs him. Thomas is essentially making room for both the human Jesus and the divine Jesus who exists after resurrection, recognizing that both are vital and inseparable aspects of his dear friend. Through this intentional presence, the act of touching the wound becomes a conduit for a shared restoration that requires both the divine invitation and the human response.

The soul wounds of war are most visible in children, the ultimate innocents. The term innocent comes from the Latin *nocens*, meaning to harm; thus, the innocents are the non-harming ones in the war equation. The ancient Swahili proverb *Ndovu wawili wakisongana ziumiazo ni nyika* translated is: *When two elephants fight, it is the grass/reeds that are hurt.* captures a tragic reality

by observing that when two elephants fight it is the reeds and the grass that are hurt. Within the theater of war, the innocents are the grass and the stage on which the tragedy unfolds. It is the grass that suffers the greatest damage as behemoths trample it into the earth. This imagery of vulnerability is where we must begin the work of healing soul wounds.

This suffering is not merely a byproduct of conflict but a violation of the very essence of childhood. Graça Machel, in her 1996 report to the United Nations' General Assembly, **Impact of Armed Conflict on Children**, states that war violates every right of a child, leaving millions not just as bystanders but as targets. For those of us who were part of Operation Babylift, this is not an abstract ethical debate but our origin story. We are all, though the term refers specifically to physical characteristics, in a spiritual sense, the *bui doi*, the *dust of life* mentioned in the musical *Miss Saigon*, conceived in strife and left to carry the memory of a war we did not start. The healing of these wounds requires a shift in our perspective, moving from viewing ourselves as collateral damage to seeing ourselves as precious beings whose lives are being restored together through divine and human partnership.

This restoration happens through what my fellow Operation Babylift adoptee, Noel Nguyen, calls our invisible threads ([Home - My Life in Mud](#)). These are the connections of memory, loss, and survival that hold us together even when we feel most alone. Healing our soul wounds requires us to trace these threads back to our beginnings, often through the preservation of our histories. We see this collaborative amipotence in the actions of persons like Glen Noteboom and John Williams of Holt International, who risked everything to pack adoption records onto a DC 3 aircraft because, in John's own words, "We were also concerned about the records — knowing how important the child histories are...that was another thing that impressed me about Holt, that they made every effort to document the background and circumstances for each child coming into care. We chartered a DC3 aircraft to take out all the boxes and boxes of childcare records and medical histories for the kids," and in the sacred-record keeping of Sister Mary Nelle Gage, who kept boxes of files safe in a basement for fifty years. Her memory-safekeeping now provides clues and links to the past for us adoptees now looking for answers. Their actions were a response to the divine lure toward justice and love, and the realization of the immense importance of records, stories and memories are for those searching for identity. Today, this work continues through **Love and Social Transformation: Empowering Scholars and Social Innovators to Develop the Love Ethic** ([The Love Ethic Network | Jenkins Center for Virtue Ethics | Labs & Centers | Ethics and the Common Good | University of Notre Dame](#)), a framework informed by trauma that treats records as relationships rather than objects. When an adoptee like me saw all the paperwork and photos and stories about me my adoptive parents kept, for the first time, I began to fully realize that God did have plans for me. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." In that moment, my soul wounds began to close as I began to recognize my place in the world.

Ultimately, the commission of the Jesus, the Risen Christ, is a call to be healers of these fractures. After showing his wounds, Jesus breathed on his disciples and said in John 20:21, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." We are sent to be the partners of an amipotent Ever Creator who cannot heal nor redress the wrongs of the world without us! This means holding governments accountable to ensure childhood remains a zone of love, peace

and laughter and safety and listening to the voices of those who carry the moral injury of war. We cannot heal if we quickly embrace resurrection and restoration and fail to give proper respect and time to the crucifixion because doing so is an illusory resurrection. We can only realize peace when we face the reality of what was done. We are only a resurrected people, an Easter people, when we first become crucified people. The way, according to Cruciform theology, to the resurrection of Easter morning is through the Cross, by the *via dolorosa*. By embracing scars as Apostle Thomas did, we transform them from marks of victimhood into signs of resilient, collaborative love. In this way, the invisible threads of our shared history bind us together in the eternal and restorative peace of God.

As you reflect on your invisible threads, is there a particular part of your own history where you feel the need for this collaborative healing the most?

Blessings,

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