

“Becoming a Healing Place”

“ . . . he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons . . . ” With that simple phrase — almost dismissed in the narrative — Mark sums up the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Clearly the ministry of healing was central to what Jesus wanted to be doing. Proclaiming the Kingdom of God has, from the outset, been accompanied by demonstrations of power — inevitably healing power.

We hear of individuals — some named (e.g. blind Bartimaeus); some identified only by relationship (as in today’s Gospel, Peter’s mother-in-law); many never identified except by the description of their malady (the woman with a flow of blood, a lame man, one who was demonized). And we hear of crowds — whole communities — that come to Jesus and walk away healed.

It should cause us to wonder why healing ministry is so suspect in the Church today.

One reason is that the healing profession has moved well past the use of leeches and bloodletting as model cures ... the practice of medicine today, in light of much of human history before this time, would have been regarded as nothing short of miraculous. We take it for granted ... indeed, we have come to expect that there is — or there soon will be — no disease that medicine cannot cure (hence our hope in the Coronavirus vaccine).

Then there are the Ernest Angleys of the world ... the antics of many a televangelist make so many things suspect. So we question the validity of their healings as we question the soundness of their preaching and the evidence of their morality.

There is almost no better feeling than feeling better. You know what I mean. You’ve had a touch of the flu and then it finally fades — glorious! Or you’ve been running a fever with chills and aches . . . and late in the

afternoon it breaks — you think you can take on the world! Or you twisted an ankle and have been treating it tenderly . . . and finally you are able to bear the whole weight of your body on it — you almost feel like dancing!

So it's quite understandable that Peter's mother-in-law, upon her healing at the hands of Jesus, got up and ***“began to serve them.”*** Some commentators want to make that the be-all-and-end-all of this story — that the purpose of this healing from Jesus is to equip her for this very service. This is then extrapolated to mean that all healing is for the goal of equipping the healed likewise to serve.

Now, serving others is a noble task and certainly within the tradition of the teachings of Christ: ***“Do unto others as you would them do unto you.”*** ***“Whatever you do to the least of these, my brothers, you have done to Me.”*** We take those words of Jesus seriously — as we should.

We find delight in serving ... that's the thing! Oh, at times we may have to discipline ourselves to serve ... we don't always “feel like it.” But in the main, we find reaching out with Christ's love to be a richly joyous enterprise.

The joy of healing is just that — the joy of finding the wholeness that God means for us to have. I believe Jesus found great joy in healing people. It was exhausting work, to be sure. Expending spiritual energy in any way depletes us at levels that no physical exercise can. Our Lord spent Himself entirely — I find no hint in the Gospels that Jesus ever turned away anyone who came to Him for healing.

There were times when unfaith got in the way of His fulfilling the healing mission. That raises the question faith and healing. Pastor Brian Stoffregen makes this point: *“What is the relationship between faith and healing — or faith and salvation? When is it appropriate to state: ‘Your faith has saved you’? When is it appropriate to state: ‘Your faith does not save you; it is God who saves you by divine grace’? NOTE: the proper Lutheran slogan is ‘saved by grace through faith.’ ‘Saved by faith’ is a*

bit of a perversion of the slogan — and, I think, misrepresents much of what happens in scriptures. Faith does not seem to be a requirement for healing or salvation. However, the presence and power of Jesus is necessary.”

To be sure, in the Gospel of Mark, the matter of faith in a healing does not come up until Jesus has already done several healings (I say “several” because we have no idea how many people were included in today’s count: **“he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons . . .”**). Last week we heard of him casting out an unclean spirit, with the person demonized most assuredly not expressing any faith statements. Today, we hear of Peter’s mother-in-law in so feverish a state that no comment comes from her lips, hence no mention of her faith. Of the many who came from the villages to be healed, we hear nothing of their faith or lack thereof.

In fact, the first time faith comes up in relationship to a healing, it comes up in the event of the paralyzed man whose friends lower him through the roof to get him to Jesus — but it is not the paralyzed man’s faith that Jesus perceives, but the faith of the friends. Finally, in the account of the woman who **“had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years”** we hear Jesus say: **“Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease”** (Mark 5). The only other time faith and healing are linked in Mark’s Gospel is the healing of Blind Bartimaeus — in which it was his persistence that seems to be the mark of faith.

Now, why do I go on so? Because the issue of faith and healing is one that touches every person — not just every person in our worship this morning, but every person.

While the experience of illness and disease is different today because we have so many new insights into how the body works than they did in Jesus’ day, some things remain constant: Pain is a very personal experience. I know my pain. I cannot know your pain. Many doctors have a little poster on the examination room wall that shows various smiley to

frowny faces which will encourage you to tell the doctor what the pain level is for you.

You have a toothache. I've had toothaches in the past, so I think I know what you're talking about. But are you describing the pain that I recall from that time when a filling came out as I was eating ice cream, the pain of which almost sent me through the roof? Or are you describing the pain of that time when a side of the tooth broke off while I was eating a taco, and I simply commented to myself how particularly crunchy that taco was?

Illness also isolates. The entire experience of being in the hospital, for instance, means great amounts of time spent alone (of course, except for those times when you want to be left alone, and they keep coming into your room to probe, measure, prod, and medicate you). Sarah Henrich writes that in the world of Jesus' day *"illness bore a heavy social cost: not only would a person be unable to earn a living or contribute to the well-being of a household, but their ability to take their proper role in the community, to be honored as a valuable member of a household, town, or village, would be taken from them."*

Aside from not being much fun, getting sick or injured brings a toll that only the person going through it can measure.

So beyond the joy that Jesus must have felt in offering healing, there was a Kingdom purpose to His healing ministry. The Kingdom of God is about bringing people into community with God and with one another. Obviously, people isolated by pain and illness are not easily brought into community.

In Jesus' day, it went further: People who were struck by some ailment, affliction, or injury were considered outside the community because this was seen as God's punishment on their sin. In most (not all) of the healing miracles done by Jesus, this issue is addressed at some point — *"Your sins are forgiven."* This does not mean that Jesus was acknowledging that false premise that illness is caused by sinful actions.

It does mean that Jesus' primary mission was to forgive sins (which He would accomplish by His death on the cross), and thus He announced forgiveness to any and all who would receive it.

But He also saw that announcing forgiveness does not automatically restore people to community. So Jesus was concerned to tear down any and all walls that could be erected to keep people out — if illness was such a wall, He healed.

Is this to be part of the Church's mission? Certainly we see in the Book of Acts healing events by the apostles. That was then; this is now ... or is that a false distinction? Is what the earliest church did a paradigm for what we should be doing? I think so. But what does that mean for the mission and ministry at St. Thomas? Are we to become a healing place?

Spiritual healing is a must. But we need also to assist people through physical, emotional, and relational wounds, afflictions, and struggles. I think this lies within the purpose statement that St. Paul expresses in today's Second Lesson: ***"I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some."*** (In other words, *"I'll do whatever it takes to bring people into right relationship with Jesus."*)

As I quoted Brian Stoffregen earlier: *"Faith does not seem to be a requirement for healing or salvation. However, the presence and power of Jesus is necessary."* It is our ministry to connect people to *"the presence and power of Jesus."* If that means offering financial assistance, we do that. If that means inviting people to worship with us, we do that. If that means providing food, shelter, clothing or any other of life's basic needs we do that. But above all else, it means that we help them to know and to grow into Jesus Christ.

That will take more than imparting information. That will require that we position people for transformation in Christ. To follow the model of our Lord — it will mean providing healing. We are to become a healing place.

Amen.