

“What About Healing?”

Healing is taking something that is wrong and making it right.

There is physical healing ... a broken arm or leg becomes whole again; an arthritic knee become fully functional; a cancer-laden organ is rid of its malignant cells; a pulled muscle is relaxed back to normal.

There is emotional healing: the malevolent voices of schizophrenia are stilled by drugs; a support group helps one who is depressed to rebuild confidence and the ability to function; anger is quelled and feelings of hurt and separation are replaced by connectedness in community and in relationships; education leads to converted insights and positive reflection where once only negative thoughts had prevailed.

There is spiritual healing: demonization is silenced; the fear of judgment melts before the declaration of forgiveness; fear, dread, anger at, distrust of, or questions about God become swept up in the joy of praise over the wonder of grace.

That last one—spiritual healing—is perhaps the hardest to understand and embrace.

Most of us have experienced physical healing — we got over the measles or mumps; we recovered from the gall bladder surgery; the flu laid us up for only a week last winter (and this year we are definitely getting that flu shot!). From minor aches and pangs to strident, even life-threatening, conditions — we know that physical healing happens.

We may be very much aware of emotional healing (although we may not call it “emotional healing”). Yesterday was a bad day — today will be much better. Maybe you slept better, ate better, got some therapeutic exercise — whatever it is, you begin this day in a better frame of mind. Friday stunk (because it was Friday!) — Saturday is much better because it is Saturday — no boss, no deadlines, no telephone calls from stupid customers. For some, psychotropic drugs work “magic”; for others talk

therapy does the trick; some benefit from Freudian or Jungian analysis; and still others are realigned by cognitive or behavioral therapy.

But what about spiritual healing? What is it? Does it happen? How can it happen? Do I need it? Can I get it?

In today's First Lesson, the prophet Isaiah contains the familiar passage:

***“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.”***

They are familiar because we hear them each Christmas when we listen to Handel's *Messiah*. They show up whenever conversation about physical healing — especially miraculous physical healing — takes place.

But Isaiah continues with what sounds disconnected to our ears:

***“For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.”***

What does that have to do with healing? Why is this a sign of the coming Messianic age? In typical fashion, we sinners tend to think primarily, if not solely, about what the impact of anything will be on ME!

Healing — especially spiritual healing — is never a private event. There is always a corporate nature; there may be, as here, even a cosmic nature to healing. When God does healing, it is hardly ever particular. Oh, there may be a specific dimension to any given healing, but God's healing is always set on a broader landscape.

When your doctor attends to you, he attends to you. His focus must be on what is happening to you, and on what he can do to make what is happening to you work for your good. You would not hold a physician in high regard who came into your hospital room and announced: *“I just*

finished examining Mrs. Fishbein, so I know all I need to know about your problem.” No, you expect — nay, you demand! — that the doctor examine you, see what is unique about your circumstances, and treat what he discovers in you, not what’s in Mrs. Fishbein. But in God’s economy (and because of God’s omnipotence and omniscience), God does not look only at you, but at the you who is in nexus with everything else. This usually comes as a shock to us sinners: Contrary to what sin tells us about ourselves . . . we are not the center of the universe.

When the prophet announces that the environment itself is changed by God’s healing power, we should begin to recognize that this is a message to us that we are never separated from the creation into which God has placed us. In that sense, all healing is spiritual. My physical and emotional self is tied to other physical and emoting selves (whether I like it or not). What happens to me affects what happens to my wife, my children, my grandchildren, my siblings, parents, nieces and nephews, cousins, people I met once fifteen years ago . . . who knows, maybe even you.

When God sends His healing power, He heals the whole situation, not just a part of it. This is the limitation my doctor cannot overcome. I really like all the doctors that I see regularly, but my liking them cannot heal my situation; he or she can treat only that part of the situation that is made known to them. My family doctor is pleased that I have lost weight (so is my wife, for that matter . . . I don’t mind it myself) — but he has no control over my living. He can suggest, advise, encourage, threaten, cajole and warn me . . . but he lacks the capacity to change me. Even I lack the capacity to change me. Oh, I can make adjustments, some minor, some major. But real change? That is a gift that comes from outside me.

God can and does effect change. He changes not only the immediate factors that bring about disease or maladies, He can alter the entire universe. In my arrogance, I expect Him to do just that just for me; but His purposes are always broader than my expectations. When God does God’s healing work, He is working always to accomplish nothing less

than the restoration of His entire creation.

In today's Second Lesson, St. James addresses our need for emotional healing. Specifically, he addresses the problem of ill-formed community. It's a common problem. We humans have preferences — we like some people better than others. We don't know why, we just do. Okay, sometimes we know why: She is astoundingly pretty; he is Adonis-like — we tend to prefer that to ugly or homely. He belches in public eight times an hour; she picks her teeth with a nail file — that turns some people off. Bad body odor, jumping fleas or lice, and bodily noises tend not to place individuals in the embraceable category.

But much of the time our preferences run below the surface, away from our awareness. James seeks to warn us about that. *“Careful!”* he cautions, *“You have this tendency to favor certain people. If you would be Christ-like (and that is supposedly the goal of the Christian life), you cannot favor one over another.”* But we do. It's our nature . . . our sinful nature. Given a choice between the spanking-clean, middle-class, well-turned-out couple and the scruffy, tattered, stinky, grungy homeless man we will gravitate toward cleanliness and away from squalor. We need to be healed of that disease . . . that preferential disease.

Listen to James: ***“If you favor one person over another, you're sinning, and this law convicts you of being disobedient.”*** Ow! Once again, left on my own, I won't get there. I am absolutely awash in this preferential bias, and I cannot find my way to being released from it. Years ago, when I taught at Lutheran High School East, one of my black students asked me: *“Pastor Just, are you prejudiced?”* I answered her, *“Yes, I am.”* She replied, *“You don't act prejudiced.”* I returned, *“I'm working on it.”* But, as much as I work on it, I still don't get there. That's not an excuse; it's a confession. Of course I am prejudiced; I'm learning from greater contact and interaction with those who are different from me, but I am not yet healed. Because the solution is not that *“I'm working on it.”* The solution must be that Christ is working on me. So maybe I should be saying here a variation of what I said a few Sunday's back: *“I have been*

healed, I am being healed, I will be healed.” St. James then challenges us: **“Show me your faith apart from the good things you do.”** He is convinced that you cannot. He goes on: **“I will show you my faith by the good things I do,”** although he has already made it clear that it is not he that is doing them, but Christ.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus effects a physical healing — a deaf man hears. It is a very physical healing. Jesus doesn’t just speak this man to wholeness; He physically leads him away from the crowd, physically spits, and physically touches Him into hearing. I don’t know why Jesus sometimes simply spoke and other times enacted (as He does here) a healing; but I am struck here by what Jesus says: **“Ephphatha!”**

It is a word to which we should give long and deliberate attention. It is not just a command to this deaf man’s ears to be readied for sound waves. It is a message to every child of God to be attentive to what God is doing in our world. Friends, there is healing going on all around us, if we will but be open to recognizing it and embracing that God is at work. Let the Holy Spirit open you to the possibility that God’s power is ready to transform, to reshape, to heal you.

Ah, you say, *“But Pastor, I’m not sick.”* Quiet. Listen. The voice you hear is God saying, *“How can I heal you? Let me count the ways.”*

Allow me to grab hold of just one — fear. Fear is an almost paralyzing sickness. I am becoming more and more convinced that fear is the single-greatest disease infecting the Christian community today. There’s a lot over which to be fearful: terrorists who want to kill and maim; lunatics who just go off; natural disasters; diseases that can wipe out whole neighborhoods in a day. Who knows what will strike when or where? There are those who will prey on that fear and try to convince us that if we vote for her, or buy his product, or follow her advice, or do whatever it is that will make him wealthy . . . then we will be safe!

But it’s not those fears that I am thinking about as the sickness that envelopes us: I’m thinking of something far less threatening that we

allow to stop us dead in our Christian-living tracks. When was the last time you spoke to someone outside your family about what Christ means to you? Why not? I think it's because we're afraid. We are afraid someone will think ill of us. We are afraid that, if we speak about matters of faith, we will be ridiculed, rejected, or rebuffed. We are afraid that we might be somehow embarrassed. Deeper than that, we fear that what we would say is the most profound center of our being will be rejected. But deeper yet, I think the fear that really binds us is the fear that we really do not embrace by faith what we say to ourselves we believe.

That's a sickness for which we have no cure — but Christ does.

The deaf man could never have come to hearing had not Jesus touched him. You and I need that same touch. And you may not like it as much as you think you will. Consider the deaf man as Jesus takes him aside (*“What's He going to do?”*), sticks His fingers in his ears (remember, he has not heard any of the conversation about healing, he's gotta wonder what's going on when some stranger pulls him away from the crowd and sticks His fingers in his ears), then He spits! (presumably not on the ground, but in his ears and on his tongue!), He looks to heaven (*“Am I that hopeless?”*), He sighs (what did that communicate?), and utters something he cannot hear. This was not an enjoyable interaction with Jesus — but the outcome was! He got opened up, and the healing power of God swept over his life, and his life was absolutely and powerfully transformed.

That's another fear we hold onto — I think we are afraid of the power of God. We want control, and if we give ourselves to God's power He will have control. But if we control the ways by which Jesus touches us; if we limit what God's healing will bring about in us — we will stay as deaf as a proverbial doorknob. We have to let the Holy Spirit lead us away from our fears, to be alone with Jesus, and let Jesus do His work on us and in us. We cannot continue limping along, hobbled by our fears, turning a deaf ear to our calling, blind to what God wants to work in us, muted by our inability to express the fullest praise that God warrants.

This deaf man was given hearing and speech — and he could not and would not be silenced. This is spiritual healing. Oh, yes, this man’s healing was physical. There is also an emotional component to his healing. But in the deepest sense, what this man experienced was a healing of his spirit — a healing of his relationship to God, a renewal of what he now correctly understood it meant to be one of God’s people.

God wants to heal you, too. Today I bid you, ***“Ephphatha!”***

Amen.