

“Hunger for Healing”

Psalm 30, Mark 1: 40-45

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In the beginning of Mark’s gospel there are many healing stories. We have just completed the first chapter and already Jesus is overwhelmed with requests for healing. A man possessed with a demon interrupts Jesus in the temple and he heals him. Jesus makes a friend’s mother well and then more people flock to Jesus to be healed. A third of Mark is made up of stories of miracles, including today’s story about Jesus healing a man with leprosy. Mark uses these miracle stories to talk about the power of God that lives in Jesus. We understand right away that this power is unique. There is no one else like Jesus. We learn what difference it makes when you have faith in Jesus. It is not enough to know that Jesus can heal people. Healing happens when we create the space within us for this healing spirit to dwell. Not all of us will have a demon spirit cast out of us or be rid of a life altering illness. However, all Christians may have an encounter with Jesus that is profoundly healing, that opens you up to see the world differently.

In the 21st century we think there is no disease we can not cure. We put a lot of time and resources into finding a cure for things like cancer or Parkinson’s disease or a whole host of other diseases. While we have made significant progress, there are still many diseases that devastate people we love. Every day teams of doctors and scientists uncover new medicines or treatments to rid the body of disease. This story reminds us that the words cure and healing are not interchangeable. You can make a person well, and they may still not be healed. One may be scientifically disease-free, however, if you go back to living your life as you always have, are you truly healed?

When Jesus heals the man with leprosy he did far more than make him disease free. In those days, an illness like leprosy made one unfit and unclean. You were kicked out of the community for having it. There were real threats to public health that can not be denied. However, the social isolation was sometimes more painful than the illness. Once this man no longer suffers from leprosy he can return to his community. He can do the things he has always loved to do without feeling like an outcast. Jesus tells him to go show the priests what has happened, but to tell no one else. Sounds like a silly request. Whether he runs and tells everyone about his healing or stays silent, once he returns to the community people are going to know what has happened.

Jesus was very concerned with situations that created social dis-ease. He was most outraged when rules and rituals made people outsiders. When a person asked for help Jesus respond regardless of the rule he might break or the person he might upset. That is why people came to Jesus, asking to be healed, expecting a miracle. They understood that his love and compassion were real. He did not only teach people how to live, but modeled this new way of being for them on the spot. There were many times when Jesus had to stop what he was doing to minister to a person in need. He had to be flexible with his agenda. I know there are many times when I don’t respond nearly as graciously.

Come back tomorrow when I have more time in my schedule. Call me when I have more time to talk. This is hardly the way Jesus would behave.

We long for God to place us in situations where we might have such healing encounters. That is why so many of us participate in mission activities. You may not think of mission work as a healing ministry. However, mission work is profoundly healing. When we work side by side to build a home with displaced folks, we are not merely putting on a roof or clearing away debris. We are healing broken spirits and participating in the kingdom of God. When we stop thinking of people as “us” and “they” and see only “we”, healing has taken place. When we no longer think in terms of “the poor” or “the homeless” or “the unemployed” and just do what is necessary to alleviate a person’s suffering or meet their basic needs as Jesus did, we are transformed by the same love Jesus showered upon the man with leprosy.

Jesus invites us to go with him to the margins, where people are hungry or homeless or cast out to break down the barriers that make us strangers to each other. It is always in the midst of community that we experience our deepest healing. Healing is complicated. Jesus makes it look easy. True healing is one part medicine and one part prayer. True healing involves social advocacy and the feeding of hungry bellies. Healing happens when we are open to receive the healing power of God and when all the forces of goodness converge.

Jesus was always on the move. He went from place to place preaching the good news and being the good news. Somehow people always knew where to find Jesus. Whenever they did, they trusted that he would never turn them away. His love and compassion were overwhelming. What I love about today’s story is the glimpse we get of the authentic Jesus. We think Jesus was always nice or never got angry. Mark uses words like sternly when he describes how Jesus spoke to this man. While today’s translation says that Jesus was moved with pity when he reached out to touch the man, other versions translate the word pity as anger. Did the thought of helping this man make Jesus angry? Perhaps Jesus was angered, not by this man’s request, but because of the injustice of a system that would cast out a man like this. Jesus came to create communities where people were not afraid to touch other people, where everyone felt the love of God in profound ways.

We may feel a twinge of this kind of anger when we serve a meal at South Park Inn. We are always glad to be there, but frustrated that we live in a world where there is still a need for homeless shelters and food pantries and feeding programs. Hearing the word anger in this context adds a new dimension to our understanding of this story. There were times when Jesus became annoyed. People were always interrupting him, making demands. People were always asking him to do something for them, now not later. (hmm...sounds a little like being a parent). He was often forced to change his plans in order to minister to the one in need. His ministry did not always happen as he envisioned it.

There is a lesson here for all of us. Sometimes life is not as we expect it to be. We feel like we are living in that insurance commercial that declares “life comes at you fast.” We don’t need a fancy insurance policy to face life’s challenges. Our insurance policy is our faith. When life comes at you fast and presents you with the unexpected, you have a way of dealing with it. You have a community to which you can turn. You have friends that are ready to surround you with love and usher in healing.

There is a sign in front of the church inviting you to a healing service this evening. What I learn from the story this morning is that all of ministry is healing. Any time we participate in God’s work there is healing. Whenever we welcome the stranger, listen to their deepest needs and call upon the Holy Spirit to be present among us we experience healing. Healing is not eliminating disease; it is creating a place where the shalom of God can dwell. May we give our lives to such work, as Jesus himself did. Amen.