

Sunday, February 4, 2024
Isaiah 40: 21-31; Mark 1:29-39
“Lifted into Healing”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

We all have them. Bad days, rough nights, horrible weeks, dreadful months. What do you do when life becomes overwhelming with anxiety or pain or sorrow? I had one such long night last week and the next day, I called a friend and asked if she could just come over and show me pictures of her grandchild. You see I had officiated at her daughter’s wedding and they had tried for years to get pregnant so I feel a little invested in this cute little 14 month old. She did one better, she showed me a video of little Kya dancing – a 14 month dancing is just about the cutest thing ever and my spirits were lifted instantly. Today’s passage is about being lifted up, lifted into healing and not just from disease or illness, but to be healed, and restored and made new.

In the time of Jesus, healings were signs of the presence of God. As I spoke about last Sunday, in the time of Jesus, they didn’t have concepts like viruses, germs, heredity and environmental factors that were understood to contribute to the cause of diseases – it was sin, demons, and evil spirits which caused them. It seems to me, though, that they had a much better concept of what healing, health and wholeness really means. Most of the healing stories in the Bible place one’s bodily disease and one’s emotional illness together. How many times are they first forgiven and then healed? How many times is it their faith or the faith of those around them that makes them well? This was the healing that Jesus brought.

Listen to this - recent studies conclude that 85% of all illnesses that physicians treat today are mainly caused by psychological attributes. In other words, 85% of all people who visit a doctor are ill, mainly because of emotional issues and not germs or viruses. Think about that for a moment, stomach problems, migraines, ulcers, near heart attacks, the list goes on and on, are mainly brought on or aggravated by something inside of us. Many define disease as something that afflicts us like cancer, something we inherited like high blood pressure, or something we catch from another like COVID. Many define illness as something we inflict upon ourselves. The word for “healthy” in Hebrew is shalom, which means to be whole, complete, at peace. What did I say last week - physicians ask what and how, and can only go so far in curing what ill us; psychologists ask why, and can only go so far in curing what aches in us; but it is religion that asks who and can make us whole, at peace. (1) Jesus came not to cure every disease, but to help us with our illnesses, to make us whole, to lift us up into a new way of living.

We continue today in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus had just called his disciples; last week we heard how he performed his first miracle in helping a man by casting out an unclean spirit within him. Still Sabbath, Jesus and his disciples go across the street and into the house of his first recruits, Simon and Andrew. Now Simon tells Jesus that his mother-in-law is ill with a high fever which is likely caused by malaria. He does this to warn him of this sickness in his house. Most likely his mother-in-law was in her private quarters, secluded from others.

Can you imagine the disciples faces when Jesus immediately goes to her, sits down beside her, and takes her by the hand and lifts her up and heals her?! Remember this was a culture in which touching a non-related woman was in itself an offense, touching one that was sick was

an even greater offense and could make someone unclean, and performing this act on the Sabbath was a tremendous social offense as well. And while his first miracle, the exorcism so to speak from earlier is important, it is also very important to mention that his first healing miracle is of a woman. An unnamed woman, which shows us she was considered ordinary, but from the very beginning Jesus is healing is of those considered the least in society.

For us women, what offends us is the next line, the fever leaves her and she immediately gets up and begins to serve them. I'm sorry, she doesn't even get a day off to recuperate? Again, we need to remember that Jesus' healing not only took away her disease but also restored her to her social position, for it was a privilege to show hospitality to important guests – it was a matter of honor, not servitude. The Greek word used here to serve can also mean to minister – once healed she is lifted back into her position to minister to others. Once healed, she is able to lift others, in the name of Christ, to a place of healing. And that is what we are to do as disciples, but first we must be healed of all that ails us.

While today we have a better understanding of diseases and illnesses, I think we are just beginning to understand the role and power of belief, of faith that is essential in the healing process. And I think we are just beginning to understand the role and power of stress and emotional circumstances, and how they impact our health.

For us adults, there are two main factors that add the most stress to our lives. And stress is behind most of those illnesses I mentioned. In today's world we might add a third stress which is becoming ill with COVID or some other disease. That's new. Can you guess what the other two stressors are? One is money and the other is conflict. Money is by far the number one stressor among adults, but this is not only the stress of not having enough money to eat and take care of essential needs. It also involves the stress of caring for others, having enough for the future. And conflicts with people run a close second. Take a moment and think of friends, family, people you know who live with so much pain, sorrow, anxiety, confusion, and stress. So how are we to be healed and lift others into healing?

One way to help achieve wholeness and healing is to be honest with ourselves and with each other. The art of life is pretending. We are terrific at pretending we are well, when we are not. And people expect this from us. Just ask someone "how are you doing?" and if they don't say, "just fine, how are you?" but answer instead, "well, I'm having a really hard time right now," people get uncomfortable! How many times are we the first ones to bring our children to the doctors and the last ones to take ourselves? How many times are we the last to admit those stressors have actually caused something physical to happen to us? Be honest. Are you okay? Really? Because most of us really aren't all of the time.

Believe me I know this to be true of myself. I grew up in a home where feelings were expressed when appropriate. In other words, I learned how to walk into very uncomfortable situations, hospital rooms, visiting those who are dying, and be present, put my emotions, feelings on a shelf and get through the moment. And then take that walk, say that prayer, cry or rant, whatever it takes. But be perfectly *okay* when needed. In fact, last year I was planning on going back out to Ohio Sunday after church, to be with my mom in her final days when the call came in on Saturday morning that she had died. I only told a couple people and just plowed through that Sunday worship service as if nothing had happened. Thanks to what my mom taught me, do your job. And then I fell apart. Appropriately. Are you okay?

Cathy Kellers was told about a book another church was using with their Deacons titled "Alongside: A Practical Guide for Loving Your Neighbor in their Time of Trial." The author asked over 50 people she knew this simple question: what was helpful and not-so-helpful to you during your most difficult life experience? And it starts with learning these four words: It's not about you. Now you may think, of course, it's not about me but she writes that almost everyone she interviewed said one of the hardest things to manage was the people who supposedly want to help but somehow made it about themselves." "You know what you should do . . . all you need is . . . I'll be right over to hang out with you for a very long time . . ." And she gives really practical advice like asking specific questions – not – "let me know if you need anything" to "I'm at the grocery store, I'd love to drop off something you might need." (2) As disciples, we need to admit our own physical and emotional needs which then will allow us to better come alongside others who are suffering and try to make their challenges more bearable.

Another way to help achieve wholeness and healing is to seek treatment, be honest with your doctor, for a good physician looks at the entire body – not just one part – but the whole. He or she may specialize in one part but is thinking and asking about the whole. One medical doctor who works with children who have cancer wrote, the practice of medicine is a covenant between the physician and the patient.

She tells the story of one patient, three-year-old Jose who had a brain tumor. A CAT scan showed the tumor was growing, but the surgery was declined because the Pentecostal parents claimed that a member of their church had received a prophetic word from the Lord, that the boy was already healed. The doctor planned a conference with the parents, the pastor and that church member. Once they had reviewed the medical facts, including her opinion of Jose's chances of survival with or without the surgery, the doctor stated, "Pastor, everyone in this room is on the same team. We all want Jose' to be healed and we all want to be sure that God receives the glory however healing happens. We'd like you to lead us in prayer for Jose'." It was agreed to wait a week, perform another CAT scan, and when it showed further tumor growth, surgery was scheduled.

The purpose of the conference-prayer meeting was not to pressure the family to accept surgery but to permit them to face the medical facts in a supportive environment where everyone was on their side." It's about being in covenant, seeking common ground, all working for the child. (3) That's healing. That's being lifted up.

Another way to achieve healing and wholeness is to be open, and allow God in. And to pray and that means, to take time to be alone in our faith. Not just alone, some of you have way too much "alone", but alone with God. One of the things that Jesus always did was to take time. Can you imagine the disciples when they first discover that not only can this man preach and teach, not only can he perform miracles, he can heal people?! The word spreads, everyone comes to be healed and Jesus heals hundreds before going to sleep that night. The next morning, they open the door to see more people lined up to be healed, the whole town, but where's Jesus? They must have thought, he went off to pray? Are you kidding, now? So, they go hunting for him – the word really is "hunting" and literally ask, "are you done yet because there are people waiting?" Jesus took the time to pray and be in the presence of God, so that he could be lifted up in healing and wholeness, and always guided into the future God – not the people – God wanted for him.

The passage from the Prophet Isaiah speaks to a tired and weary people who likely had some trouble imagining their new future after the exile. How many times do we too not recognize God's creative power among us? Have you not known? Have you not heard? And the images Isaiah uses are fascinating. As if God is sitting atop a dome which covers the entire earth, where below, the tinier, less powerful inhabitants go about their business, like insects in a terrarium. The dome was like a boundary to protect the earth from the waters of chaos. And whatever void or loss had happened to the people of Israel, from the loss of princes or rulers; Isaiah tell them, God will bring something new. For our God continues to create, sustain, blow the chaff away and make room for a new creation. And when you think God is not listening, not acting, just look to the heavens, the moon and the stars, are any of them missing? Floated away? No, God has named them and claimed them just like the people of Israel. Just like us.

And God will not faint or grow weary, God is not finished yet. As one pastor writes, "Moving forward with joy into a newly created future that one cannot yet imagine may require strength beyond what humans hold themselves. The promise of God's continual creative work, with its mysterious yet life-giving power, continues to be a word of hope for God's tired and weary people." (4) This is the deep and fundamental tension at the heart of living, that we live in a deeply tragic world but we also cling to the promise that God is faithful and God's work continues and is inevitable. God will prevail.

Jesus left that area after his time in prayer, because the people began to cry for his physical healing, not his message as a whole, the emotional, physical and spiritual healing of the people. We too need emotional, physical and spiritual healing at times. And so, let us be honest with ourselves and seek the help we need, for it's hard to concentrate on faith when a body is in turmoil, when our heart is in turmoil. Let us seek God's touch and the touch of others to be lifted into healing. Let us find our own "deserted places" in order to re-energize and charge our spiritual batteries; and find what we need so that we may walk alongside others in need. Maybe all you need is a little bit of groceries, a minute alone in prayer, or a video of a little child dancing, just dancing. In the name of the one who brings healing and wholeness, peace and laughter. Amen.

(1) Markquart, The Rev. Edward. Sermons from Seattle/ Hunger for Healing.

(2) Beckman, Sarah. Alongside: A Practical Guide for Loving Your Neighbor in their Time of Trial. P. 11.

(3) Komp, The Rev. Diane. "A Mystery Story: Children, Cancer, and Covenant" Theology Today 4/92.

(4) Wendland, The Rev. Kristin. "Creation is not a one-time act". www.workingpreacher.org.