

Sermon: The Healing Touch of Jesus

Rev. Carol Ruthven

Scriptures: Isaiah 40:21-31, Psalm 147:1-12, 21c, 1 Corinthians 9:16-23, Mark 1:29-39

“Hallelujah! How good it is to sing praises to our God! ... He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” Psalm 147:1, 3

These days when we cannot be out and about as much as we'd like, laughter can be healing and reading comic strips can bring us some joy and laughter. There are always cartoons that make me laugh and allow me to begin my day on a cheery note. Sometimes there are funny cartoons that have a deeper meaning as well. I'm reminded of a Beetle Bailey cartoon in which a preacher is at the pulpit in a church filled with people. The church sign on the yard outside said: "Service Today: For the downtrodden and depressed. Bless the Meek." As we are soon approaching the one-year mark of living in the midst of the COVID pandemic, many people are feeling downtrodden and depressed. The Good News is that our scriptural lessons today provide us with hope that can uplift and sustain us in the weeks and months ahead.

When we could gather safely together before the pandemic, many of us looked forward to every Sunday. Our spirits were always lifted up by the peaceful silence of the sanctuary, deeply meaningful prayer and liturgy, and joyful singing in the worship service. When we left, our spirits were renewed and we felt strengthened for the week ahead. Now we must find new ways of finding this inner peace and well-being to sustain us in these challenging times.

The pandemic has taken a terrible toll in our lives and the lives of other people. Unfortunately pain is a reality of our human existence. None of us can escape experiencing some sort of pain at some point in our lives. At least that has been my experience. There is comfort found in today's scripture lessons. Mark tells us about Jesus healing the mother-in-law of Jesus' disciple Simon. Last week, in Mark's gospel we learned of Jesus healing a man possessed by evil spirits. We may think that these are isolated miracles and only happen when Jesus is present. We may think that such healing cannot happen today because Jesus is not physically here with us. Although Jesus may not be physically present with us in a way that we can see with our own eyes and touch with our own hands, the healing power of Jesus is present with us at all times.

I have witnessed the power of Jesus' healing in my ministry and in my work as a Hospice Chaplain. When I was working the night shift as a CPE chaplain at St. Joseph's Hospital in Lexington, I was called up to a ward to visit a man who was in an agonizing struggle with evil spirits or what is sometimes called "the dark night of the soul." He was crying out and could not be consoled by the nursing staff. I quietly entered the room, stood next to his bedside and told him that I was there. I listened patiently as he spoke and cried out. He wanted to hear the words of John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." He was struggling with things he had done in the past and was fearful that he might not be saved. After talking with him, assuring him of God's love, and

praying with him, I gently held his hand and remained at his bedside for a long time in silent prayer. Eventually he calmed down and his son came into the room to stay with him. The next day, I saw this man sitting up in a wheelchair surrounded by several family members. I had to look twice because I hardly recognized him; he was so calm and peaceful. The power of prayer and God's love had freed him from the evil spirits that had tormented him the night before.

As a hospice chaplain I was visiting a patient in a nursing home, who was angry, shouting and extremely agitated. When I entered her room, I explained who I was and I sat at her bedside, gently held her hand, and quietly prayed until she calmed down. When the nurse took her blood pressure, she said she was amazed. She said "Her blood pressure has come down completely; I've never seen that happen so quickly before."

Now I mention this not because I claim to be a faith healer. I would never make such an audacious claim. I mention this because I believe that it was Jesus' power of healing at work and I was simply a vessel through which Jesus works. I also believe that each and every one of you can be a vessel through whom Jesus can perform his healing power.

I've often heard people who are ill say that they must have done something wrong to make God angry, so God is punishing them. Or they will say: "I must have sinned and this illness is God's way of punishing me for my sin." Nothing could be further from the truth. God's desire is for our health and well-being.

In ancient times, people associated illness and disease with possession by evil spirits or demons. Jesus knew that this was wrong. His understanding of illness and healing is much more like our modern understanding of illness and healing. Jesus understood that healing is about restoring us to wholeness and well-being. Medicine, modern psychotherapy, and faith are designed to restore people who are ill to wholeness and well-being.ⁱ

It fascinates me the number of times that Scriptures refers to touch. The word touch is mentioned 139 times in the Holy Bible.ⁱⁱ In the Old Testament, through his divine touch God transformed people's hearts and they turned to him (1 Sam 10:26). God's touch purified people of their sins (Isa 6:7; Jer 1:9) and God's touch imparted divine truth to prophets and leaders (Jer 1:9; Daniel 10:16; Daniel 10:18).ⁱⁱⁱ

All four Gospels of the New Testament reveal the healing power of Jesus' touch that cured people of various infirmities and restored life to the dead. Last week we learned of Jesus healing a man with leprosy (Mark 1:41) and today we hear about Jesus' healing of Simon's mother-in-law's fever by simply touching her hand and lifting her up. We will continue to hear about more of Jesus' miracles of healing described in the Gospel of Mark. Throughout the history of the Christian Church, intercessory prayers for healing have called upon Jesus' healing touch.^{iv}

Our faith community is also vital in the healing process. Healing is not limited to healing illnesses and physical ailments. Healing also refers to our sense of well-being, inner peace, and wholeness. Love is a transformative power in bringing wellness and inner peace to persons who are weary, tired, overwhelmed, depressed, discouraged or sad. Each one of us can contribute to this healing by sharing our love and God's love

with other people. When we come to church on Sunday and feel depressed or disheartened, worried or sad, we are able to leave feeling much better because other people have shown us just how much they love us. They feel that love when they are hugged, or in the Exchange of the Peace, or when their name or the name of a loved one is mentioned in our Prayers of the People. During this time when we cannot meet in person, we can share our love and God's love by calling people and listening with compassionate hearts, writing cards and notes, praying for someone, or offering to help them in some way. In all these ways, we can extend the healing touch of Jesus to bring joy, wellness and peace to others.

Let me close with this healing blessing, And All Be Made Well

That each ill
be released from you
and each sorrow
be shed from you
and each pain
be made comfort for you
and each wound
be made whole in you
that joy will
arise in you
and strength will
take hold of you
and hope will
take wing for you
and all be made well.

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ⁱ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2008), Mark 1:29-39, Pastoral Perspective, p. 334.

ⁱⁱ https://www.answers.com/Q/How_many_times_is_the_word_touch_mentioned_in_the_bible

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/touch/>.

^{iv} Ibid.