

For much of my ministry, I must confess: I have avoided healing stories in the Gospels. They made me uncomfortable. Though I grew up in a very loving but staid small town Presbyterian Church, I saw and heard enough zealous faith-healing preachers on TV and elsewhere to be wary of healing stories. It wasn't that I dis-believed Jesus' ability to perform miracles. I just could not figure out how that translated to today. In early ministry, I vividly remember a young man, who was dying of a brain tumor. He and his wife had a little boy, and she was pregnant with their second son. His parents were convinced that God was going to work a miracle on that tumor, if only we all had enough faith. It was painful to lead prayers when they were in the room, because I could not pray for the miracle the parents wanted when I knew the couple wanted prayers for comfort and acceptance, as the tumor was very advanced.

Yet I've seen miracles of healing – even in the last week, we saw Wes Rineer turn the corner on pneumonia after it seemed Hospice might be soon be called in for end of life care. I believe the music of the Gospel Guys and the prayers and love of this church and his family made a difference, along with some good strong antibiotics. And we saw the ultimate healing of Ann Engster in her death, in her departure from the suffering of this life and her move into the new realm of life in the eternal presence of God. Just as we witnessed the same in the life, death, and new life of Jeff Steele just after Christmas.

As I have gotten older, I've come to appreciate that healing takes place in so many different ways. Through medical help, through our attentiveness to our own bodies, minds, and spirits; through prayer, through regular experience of Word and Sacrament, through the sharing of peace and forgiveness, through the caring love of congregation, friends, and family. Hear with me this story of the healing presence of a prayerful Jesus Christ.

## Mark 1:29-39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. <sup>30</sup> Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. <sup>31</sup> He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. <sup>32</sup> That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. <sup>33</sup> And the whole city was gathered around the door. <sup>34</sup> And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. <sup>35</sup> In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. <sup>36</sup> And Simon and his companions hunted for him. <sup>37</sup> When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." <sup>38</sup> He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." <sup>39</sup> And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons. (NRS)

Psychological disorders used to be blamed on demonic possession. During the Middle Ages the cure generally meant torture—to chase away the demons, even if it killed the patient. As the 19th century transitioned to the 20th, talk therapy became the standard technique for treating the mentally ill. Freud didn't invent it, but he did take credit for it. For most of the 20th century, psychological disorders were viewed as illnesses of the mind, not of the body...By the end of the 20th century, neuroscience helped us to know patients were suffering from an imbalance of neurotransmitters. Not all stigma is gone, but more people are willing to seek treatment for their disorders, which is good. Just as we can think of diabetes as a lack of insulin that can be treated with shots, so we can view depression as a lack of serotonin, which we can treat with pills in many cases. But in addition to the right medication, changes in lifestyle—diet, exercise, social support, even worship in the sanctuary—can go a long way toward healing for all of our dis-ease. (David Ludden, PhD, *The New Demonic Possession: Perceptions of mental illness, then and now*, Posted Jan 25, 2016, Psychology Today)

For Jesus proclaiming the good news was inextricably connected to healing. Rarely do you see him teaching without healing. In our verses today, he is healing, silencing, casting out demons, praying, and saying it is time to proclaim to the next town in Galilee, but the next two stories in Mark are about healing – not preaching. The Greek word, *sozo*, means to save, heal, preserve, rescue. Richard has helped me appreciate how significant healing is to the Christian understanding of salvation. I agree with the Eastern Church's theology that salvation is much more about healing us than acquitting us of our crimes against God and humanity. Those who think God the Father is so angry at us that God the Son must take our punishment are not seeing the fullness of salvation theology. The Triune God wants us all well, and to be well, we need communion with God and one another.

A sanctuary, by definition, is a place of welcome, a safe place, a place where love of God and humanity are celebrated. Worship is our celebration of the love of God and of one another. This is both truth and mandate for us. We sang the beautiful words of "Let us build a house, where love can dwell and all can safely live, a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive. Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace; here the love of Christ shall end divisions. All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place." To welcome someone is to identify with them in some way. That's our job with one another every Sunday – to identify, to hear one another's pain and joy and to identify with.

God's saving act of love in the Incarnation is that in Jesus, God totally identifies with us. God not only walks a mile in our moccasins, but God lives our life and dies our death. That's how we belong so completely to God – because God became one of us. And sadly, when people saw God's boundless love fully embodied in Christ in the first century, the powerful people felt threatened by him and ultimately killed him, but they did not win the battle of life and death – God did! This understanding of God's purposes is so much more profound and less bewildering than the notion that God the Father needed a scapegoat to punish.

Yes, Jesus died because sin had so separated us from God. But God's intent is healing our brokenness, not exacting punishment on us.

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This week we joyfully entered the sanctuary under construction over there to write scripture, hymns, prayers, and names on the walls before the dry wall goes up. What you see on the screen is just the one central panel. Nearly every wall was covered by names and scripture. This church has been shaped by many people, some of who are no longer with us. It's been shaped by people who were never here present with us, but people who influenced the church and us in the church. Though Richard and I were writing nearly every day this week, along with many of you, I have continued to have such a strong feeling of incompleteness as if we could never finish writing all the names, all the truth, and all the prayers that need to be there. Hebrews 12 says, "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us"

Running with perseverance of faith is kind of like going to rehab or gym, or taking the medicines that you need, or seeing the therapist. Just like we must take medicines for a long time to heal our bodies, minds, and spirits, so we need the weekly medicine of Communion to heal us of our sin, our brokenness. Just as we need healthy foods – like dark green and orange veggies, and whole grains and proteins -- to build strong bodies, so we need the food of the Holy Scripture which consumed over time builds strong souls in the company of prayerful and healthy friends. Even God in human flesh needed both food and time away from hard work to rest and pray. Working too much will either make your body sick or give you a sin-sick soul.

I am so grateful that God's giving us the privilege of enlarging the space where worship's healing work can continue for years to come, where many more broken people like us can come in and find peace in belonging to Christ in love.