

If You Choose  
Sermon for East Craftsbury Presbyterian Church  
February 12, 2012  
Rev. Jim Stover

Text: Mark 1: 40-45 (with reference to 2 Kings 5:1-14 & Psalm 30)

Theme: God may not always cure our diseases; but God is always there to offer healing – to offer a deeper wholeness in many different ways – and we are offered the opportunity to be instruments of that healing, restoring love.

Today is “healing day” in the lectionary, it would seem. We have Jesus healing a man with leprosy; the Old Testament prophet Elisha healing the great general, Naaman; and even our Psalm for today – Psalm 30, declaring:

“O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me...  
You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my  
sackcloth and clothed me with joy” (vv. 2, 11)

These are wonderful words of joy and praise to God, and our Scriptures today are wonderful testimonies to God’s love put into action. And yet, we know that in our lives and world today not everyone’s disease is cured – not everyone receives the physical healing for which we earnestly pray. So what, then, is the meaning for us today of another story about a miraculous healing?

For many of us, this is anything but just an academic question. We know people who are in real pain – physically, emotionally, and spiritually – perhaps we are in great pain ourselves, and we may even find stories like this one difficult to hear.

Let me be up front with you. Our Scripture today offers no magic formula or guarantee of all our diseases being cured. But it is a powerful testimony about the power of God’s love to bring healing – albeit healing of a type that may not be exactly what we pray for. Thus, I have no great words today about why some prayers are answered and others are not, but I can testify that God’s reconciling, restoring love is alive and powerfully at work in our world today – and we can be part of spreading that healing love.

We find that message as we dive into our Gospel passage today. First of all, we must notice that it never says that the so-called leper was ever “cured.” While that is the clear implication, our Scripture actually uses the words “he was made clean.” Variations on the phrase “being made clean” are used four times in the few, short verses of this passage.

The same is true of our Old Testament reading from today. As you heard, “Naaman went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan... and he was clean.”

Those of you who have read Scripture deeply will know that the terms “clean” and “unclean” were very important in the Old Testament law and in Jewish society. To be “unclean” meant you could not be part of the community of the people of God and you could not enter the Temple where God’s presence was thought to reside. Specifically, the book of Leviticus specifies that lepers (actually referring to many more conditions than the modern medical definition of leprosy) had to live outside of town and cry out “Unclean! Unclean!” when approached.

Thus, it would have been quite the scandal for Jesus – with his growing reputation as a holy man – to be approached by a leper. But rather than recoiling in horror lest he, himself become unclean, Jesus reaches out and touches the diseased and ostracized man.

There are important lessons here for us today. Most importantly, Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God in word and deed is about overcoming “illness” rather than curing of “disease.” That may seem like semantics to you, but there is an important distinction here. “Disease” refers to a biomedical malfunction affecting an organism that can be scientifically understood and addressed. An “illness” is a “disvalued state of being in which social networks have been disrupted and meaning lost.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus, what we see in our passage today is not an emphasis on scientific treatment of a disease. Rather, we see Jesus breaking down the social power of this illness to separate this man from his family, his community, and even from God. As we have seen all throughout this first chapter of Mark with Jesus casting out demons and healing the sick, Jesus here is restoring this man to the community of the people of God.

This is ultimately the point of Jesus’ ministry. He did not come to cure every disease of our bodies, but he did come to break down all the barriers that separate us from the love of God, from one another, and even from our own true selves.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 210.

This includes casting out demons and curing diseases, but it also includes breaking the power of injustice, social ostracization, sin and even of death.

You will remember that Jesus tells the healed man to “show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded” – the very things required for the man to be restored to the community of the people of God and to worship of God in the Temple.

He also tells the man not to tell anyone about what Jesus has done. Why? Perhaps Jesus knows what the crowds will do. As David Lose writes, “They will come seeking a miracle worker with the power and authority to grant them what they wish. Jesus, as Mark makes abundantly clear, is not this kind of Messiah... God doesn't want simply to make our lives a little better but actually intends to redeem them.”<sup>2</sup>

Friends, God may not always cure our diseases. But God is always there to offer true healing. The kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed is continuing to break into our world, overcoming injustice and oppression; diseases of mind, body, heart, and spirit; and even overcoming sin and death. Yet as we await the final, physical fulfillment of the promises of the kingdom of God, we can and do experience the healing presence of our loving God, and we are called into the service of God’s in-breaking, reconciling love. Thus our main theme today is this: God may not always cure our bodily diseases, but God is always there to offer healing – a deeper wholeness and restoration that may take many different forms – and we who follow Jesus are called to be instruments of that healing, restoring love.

To put it another way, let me go back to the distinction between biomedical “disease” and relationship-breaking power of “illness.” Even the finest doctors among us cannot cure all disease, but we can all participate in the relationship-restoring love of God that overcomes the isolation and ostracization of illness and other barriers to godly community.

For some of us that involves reaching out in love to those who are sick and lonely, isolated by disease or by physical ability or whatever condition.

For our Mission, Care & Outreach Committee this meant committing to check in with members of our congregation – whether in person or by phone – so that everyone knows they are valued and loved.

---

<sup>2</sup> David J. Lose, “Living the Word” in *The Christian Century*, 31 January 2012.

For some of the rest of us this may mean participating in the farm-worker outreach dance this coming Saturday night so that we can build relationships with these often isolated members of our community.

These are small – albeit significant – ways we can be instruments of God’s healing, relationship-restoring love. But let me not take the punch out of this passage. When our passage says Jesus was “Moved with pity” for the afflicted and ostracized man kneeling in front of him, we only get the bare minimum sense of the meaning of the Greek word used here. The very literal meaning refers to a deeply visceral response that compels one to action.

As Gary Charles writes, “The compassion of Jesus is no sentimental pity for this poor man. [Jesus’] compassion compels [him] to reach across the boundary of disease to touch an untouchable, violating Jewish law, and in the process to make himself an untouchable...”<sup>3</sup>

So profound is the depth of Jesus’ compassion for this man, cut off from relationship with the people of God, that Jesus takes upon himself the man’s unclean status. Such is the very high calling of Jesus – a calling that has inspired Christians throughout history to stand for social justice in the face of violent repression and inspired followers of Jesus to minister to the sick and dying at great risk to their own health and life. Are we here today willing to risk our lives, our health, our social status, our wealth and our privilege and our comfort to follow in this way of Jesus?

As profound and true as this challenge is, I want to close by circling back to where I started – with the question of physical healing. As much as I’ve tried to emphasize that our passage today is about a very wide sense of healing as God’s relationship-restoring love acting upon our lives and world in many different ways, I would not blame any of you in the least if you find yourself still struggling with today’s Scriptures as you or those you love face a very real pain of body, mind, heart or spirit. Hearing the words of the Psalm, “You have turned my mourning into dancing... and clothed me with joy” may indeed be very difficult when you or those you love remain clothed with sadness, worry, or mourning.

---

<sup>3</sup> Gary W. Charles, “Exegetical Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* (year B, vol. 1), ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 361.

While there is much more we could say about this, ultimately no one can ever really say anything that will take away that pain. So today I will just leave you with one final story about a contemporary healing that I think says more than my exposition ever can. And I will warn you, it is a healing story about breast cancer, and does confront the very physical realities of that disease quite directly.

“[A] woman, 38 years old, is diagnosed with breast cancer and has to have a total mastectomy. Two years later the cancer comes back, and her doctor schedules her for another mastectomy.

She used to be a 44-D. Now, for the first time in 25 years, she can look down and see her feet. She hasn't been able to do that since she was 16 years old, and now she sees her stupid feet all the time. Every time she sees them, she weeps.

Since the surgery, she's been determined not to let her husband see the scars, the evidence of what was removed. For two years she's gone to bed with a little camisole on, and underneath that camisole is a bra stuffed with soft cotton.

But early one spring morning, on the first day of the week, something inspires her to turn on all the lights, to take off not only her camisole but also her bra with the cotton stuffing. With all of her armor on the floor, she stands naked in front of her partner.

After two years, she stands, wounded and resurrected all at the same time.

Her partner wraps his arms around her and whispers in her ear, "You're beautiful, just beautiful." Wiping the tears from her face, she whispers back, "Don't hold onto me!" Then, looking down at her feet, she clarifies: "Don't hold onto me! Now that I can see my feet all the time, I can see how much I need a new pair of shoes!"

The two of them laugh and cry and believe once again in the psalmist's song: "You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and you have clothed me with joy," right down to my feet.<sup>4</sup>

In the name of the embodiment of God's healing love, Jesus Christ. Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Myer Boulton, "Clothed with joy right down to her feet" in "Century Blogs" on the website of *The Christian Century*, 29 April 2011.