

Healing and Hope

Luke 4:16-19 and Mark 1:21-34, 6:53-56

We're following Jesus through the gospel of Mark this winter, looking at the early part of Jesus' ministry these first few weeks. This morning: Jesus' healing ministry. We just heard—from Luke—Jesus' sense of his call to proclaim good news, and to enact it—particularly among the poor, the oppressed and unjustly treated, and... to those in need of healing. And he practiced what he preached, from the very beginning of his public ministry. Here is what happens following Jesus' baptism and proclamation of the Kingdom of God being at hand...

Mark 1:21-34

²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

²⁹As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon's mother-in-

law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³²That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And 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.

Mark 6:53–56

⁵³When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

This is the word of the Lord!

As we follow the early part of Jesus' life and ministry in a "what happens next" sort of way, following his baptism, and being tested in the wilderness, *what happens next* is that Jesus begins healing people. In all of the gospels, when Jesus begins to itinerate, his first actions while he's out and about are the works of healing people—physically, emotionally, spiritually, and in all the ways we think of healing—a wholistic, making well of the whole person.

Jesus' healing ministry is what gained him notoriety. We heard it in the readings, that people flocked to him because of it. So, Jesus' reputation from the

very start was: people get well around this guy. This was a significant aspect of his ministry, and I would go so far as to say it was his *signature* work during his life. This is what he was known for—this is what created the town gossip, this is why people flocked to him—partly out of curiosity, I'm sure, but mostly because they wanted to experience his healing power and compassion. So, this is a crucial aspect of the life and work of Jesus, and this is why it deserves our full attention.

What his healings did: they revealed God's presence, they exhibited God's love, and they built faith, brought faith, or restored faith in many people. This isn't just 1st century free medical care. These healings reveal who God is, they build faith, and build the Kingdom of God.

And by putting all of these healing accounts so close together in the first part of his gospel, and then giving account after account throughout the rest of the gospel, Mark is telling us that healing was a *normal* part of Jesus' work. It was a *central* part of what he did. It was not a side part of Jesus' work, an occasional thing he did now and then. It was a *normal* and *regular* part of his work. It was part of the package deal that came with the proclamation of the good news of the Kingdom—as we heard from Luke's account of Jesus' inaugural address in his home town.

So, this was normal for him, not extra. And, as we read through Mark (and Mathew and Luke too), Jesus intended this to be normal for his followers as well. In fact, bringing healing and wholeness was the reputation of the early church, just like it was Jesus' reputation. This was normal for them too. In the gospels we see Jesus sending out his disciples on short term mission trips, and one of their assignments is, among other things, "heal the sick, and proclaim to them that the Kingdom of God has come near to you." Healing and Kingdom proclamation went together as part of what Jesus' followers were commissioned to do. They were practically seen as one and the same.

And this became the norm in the first centuries as the church grew and developed and spread. In the early years of the Christian church, as the Roman empire became more corrupt and uncaring toward its citizens (especially toward non-Romans), it was the church, the Christians, who cared for the sick and the outcast and the under-served. During plagues the Romans would sometimes quarantine the very sick people and let them die apart from the healthy population. And it was the church that took them in and cared for them. This is the beginning of the hospital movement; this is true Christian hospitality. Based on Jesus' "hospital" work with the sick. And by the 5th century the church was building a real hospital in every cathedral town in Europe.

And so, the healing of the sick became associated with the church—with the people who were following The Way of Jesus. It was as normal and regular for the Jesus people as it was for Jesus himself.

And this may surprise some of us, that even our Presbyterian church constitution affirms the healing ministry of Jesus through the church. Our Book of Order says this: *“Healing was an integral part of the ministry of Jesus which the church has been called to continue as one dimension of its concern for the wholeness of people. Through services for wholeness, the church enacts its ministry as a healing community.”* I am so glad that our Presbyterian church sees this as a part of who we are and what we do. Carefully and prayerfully, of course, in our modern context, as we seek the wholeness and well-being of all people, in all the ways that we define wellness.

Again, healing builds faith; it exhibits the Kingdom, and the *church’s* reputation becomes, “People get well around these folks”—just as it was Jesus’ reputation. Because it’s Jesus working through God’s people to bring wholeness and wellness in all the ways people can be well: emotionally, relationally, spiritually, as well as physically.

There are many layers to human beings, and therefore many layers of healing. Physical healing is just one layer, and it's the outer layer. The goal of any healing is to create a wholeness deep within. And this can happen without physical healing. We don't always know what God is doing in another person's life beneath the surface. Heck, we don't always know what God is doing in *our own life* beneath the surface! We are called to trust that God is doing the inner work that is needed, regardless of the outward and physical manifestation of healing. We can possess a deep and full and confident sense of ourself even in the midst of infirmity. It's a matter of what God is doing.

Let's see how it all began...

As we reflect on our accounts from Mark this morning, I'd like to look at **how** Jesus healed, and **who** Jesus healed. And I'm going to use this morning's readings as representative examples of *all* of the healings that Jesus performed.

First, *how* Jesus healed. Very simply, we can say that there is no one size fits all approach to Jesus' healing work. In fact, as I read the gospels it seems like Jesus never did it the same way twice:

Some he healed by rebuking the *physical illness or unclean spirit*.

Some he healed by speaking to the *person* ("be well," "stand up..." etc.).

Some he healed by using only words.

Some he healed by laying on of his hands.

Some were healed by *them* touching *Jesus*.

Some he healed by making mud and rubbing it on their eyes to restore their vision.

Some he healed from a distance.

Some he healed from up close.

Some people come to Jesus with a request for healing for *themselves*.

Some people request healing on behalf of *another*.

Some healings are initiated by Jesus without a request.

The good news in all this is that there is no formula that Jesus uses in healing. Jesus seems to handle every person on a case-by-case basis. And, he is showing us that he is free to heal how and when he chooses.

And I want us to notice that there is no formula *on the receiving end* either, on the part of those requesting healing—there are no magic words or incantation, no Harry Potter spell that magically gets Jesus to do something. There is, however, some amount of **faith** present in all of Jesus' healings, on the part of at least one person—whether it's the person requesting it directly, for themselves, or the person requesting it on behalf of someone else. But even then, the faith comes in different forms, and to differing degrees.

So, what *is* the role of faith in healing? In other words, what is a person's role in receiving, or participating in, the healing ministry of Jesus? Let's take a moment and look at the role of faith in Jesus' healings, as told in the gospels:

In some cases, we see a person approach Jesus with humility, and with boldness, expressing their belief that Jesus has the authority and the ability to make them well. In one case, in Mark 4, a leper says to Jesus, "If you choose" or "If you are willing," you can make me clean—in other words, *I know you can do this!* And I would *like you* to do this. It's humble *and* bold. This approach is respectful of God's sovereign will; it's respectful of God's sovereign purposes. And at the same time, it is assertive. Faith, in this example, is coming to Jesus and entrusting *ourselves* to him. I know you can do this. Now, what do *you* want to do?

Note: Over years I have known folks who have prayed for healing, or sought healing on behalf of others, and were told: you/they weren't healed because you didn't have enough faith; you didn't pray enough or in the right way; you didn't come to Jesus with 100% belief. That isn't right. In fact, it's very wrong. Saying those things causes more harm than help. Healing is always by *Jesus'* choice, never because of extra effort on a person's part, or by doing or

saying things perfectly. Healing isn't something we earn; it's a gift that is received from God. So we come to him with the faith that we have in our hands, just as it is, and offer ourselves just as we are, or we bring another as they are, and let God do what God wills. There are people in the Bible who received God's mercy and grace and healing who barely moved the needle on the faith-o-meter. So, 100% belief is not a requirement.

Jesus heals because he wants to, and because it fulfills a purpose, and because it brings God glory. It exhibits God's Kingdom. If Jesus doesn't heal, physically/outwardly, that's also part of his decision, and purpose. It's a mystery, and it can be disappointing. However, it changes nothing about God's love for anyone. It just means he is working out his purposes in other ways, doing a deeper inner healing, or he wants us to be patient and wait for the healing in due time, as his purposes are being worked out in the process of waiting.

So, some people come in humility and simply place *themselves* in the hands of Jesus and entrust themselves to God's sovereign purpose for them.

Others approach Jesus with faith, but they approached Jesus *on behalf of someone else*. We might think of this as intercessory prayer; where someone makes a request to Jesus on behalf of someone else. We heard that in our

readings from Mark, where some would literally carry their sick dear ones to Jesus. And if we think about it, that's what we do when we pray for others: we carry them to Jesus. That can be a nice mental image for us in our prayers for others.

These examples show us the power of Jesus through intercessory prayer. Prayer on behalf of others, entrusting *others* to him... believing in the ability and authority of Jesus to heal the people we carry to him. Never underestimate the power of God through intercessory prayer!

And, in all of these accounts it must be reiterated: Jesus' desire is to heal. It's clear from our gospel accounts today, and others, that Jesus *desires* wellness and wholeness for people. He says on a couple occasions, "I am willing; I do choose." He heals Peter's mother-in-law as soon as he enters the house. And we are told Jesus heals the people who were brought to him in the evening. So it's clear that Jesus *desires* to heal.

And again, Jesus' healing includes all of the manifestations of healing and wholeness and wellness: physical healing and wholeness, emotional healing and wellbeing, relational, and spiritual. This is the true practice of religion: which literally means "to mend," to re-ligament, to bind, heal. It's a beautiful image.

That's *how* Jesus healed. Briefly, let's look at who Jesus healed and then pull this all together.

As all the gospel writers communicate about Jesus' healing ministry, they make it clear that Jesus made no distinctions and showed no favoritism to any person who would receive healing. Jesus excluded no one from receiving the mercy of healing. There is no preferential treatment. He healed lepers, Roman centurion's servants, children, women, Jewish persons, non-Jewish persons.

When I was in seminary, I took a quarter of what's called CPE—which stands for clinical pastoral education. It's a hospital internship, to help us become acquainted with all the situations and illnesses that happen in hospitals, and to equip us to be our best selves as pastors and chaplains in those situations. I took my CPE at L.A. County General Hospital, with other seminarians preparing for pastoral ministry. We all took turns working in various wards of the hospital to gain experience.

Once while I was working the shift in the emergency room, I made an observation: in one bed was a homeless woman recovering from a drug overdose; in another, a Latino man badly injured from a fall, also with no health insurance (they turned no one away at this hospital); in another bed was a well-

dressed businessman who had been in a terrible car accident; in another, a young man with AIDS who was suffering with pneumonia; in another, a mom with her baby who had a high fever. And there were dozens more in the waiting area.

There were two big aha's for me that day: 1. Pain and illness and tragedy are no respecter of persons. Pain and tragedy do not care if you're wealthy or poor, male or female, from the western hemisphere or eastern/southern, whether well-educated or not, whether you drive a BMW or a beater. Everyone in that emergency room was on level ground. Everybody suffers some kind of pain, or illness or tragedy at some point in their life. 2. Second aha: Jesus loves all of these people equally, and wants to bring his wellness to them in some way. Jesus doesn't see someone's status in life or who they are or where they've been, in order to make judgments about whether or not they deserve help. He sees a human being in need.

In pulling this all together, there is a theme that runs through this series of healings, and his other healings: namely, that Jesus is more eager to help than we often realize; and that he will move, and call his followers to move, beyond all social boundaries, religious boundaries, racial and cultural boundaries, and any walls, and bring the help needed.

It's important to emphasize that being a healing presence and participating in healing ministry doesn't mean we perform the miraculous, or that that's the only way that healing happens. You know, spit in some dirt to make mud and put it on peoples' eyes, say a few words, and people miraculously regain their sight and all that. Healing can happen because of a kind word; it can happen when we take time to really see someone, and pay attention to them, and listen to their story; it can happen when we act in kind and helpful ways. It can happen when we offer to pray for someone.

Those expressions of healing are so needed, especially these days! People are carrying a lot of stress and confusion and fatigue right now. Remembering that, and choosing to be a healing presence as we go about our daily lives is a beautiful thing we can do. The more I read, not just Christian editorials and books about living well in this time but other religious and non-religious books and editorials about living well in this time, the more I am hearing them all say that one of the most important things we can be and do is: be a healing presence. I see and hear that phrase frequently. Be a healing presence. We're being invited to learn to frame our words and actions as healing words and actions. Again, this is the practice of true religion (re-ligamenting). So, instead of just saying, "I'm

being kind” or generous, we can say, “I am being a healing presence. I’m contributing to the well-being of people, and of the world.”

Each of us needs to figure out what that looks like in our unique way of living out our faith and discipleship, but the call is clear: think of ourselves as healers, by God’s grace and with God’s help. To be a healing presence. Even as we let God heal our lives.

We Come to You for Healing, Lord