

Healing and Hospitality

Psalm 147:1-11 Luke 4:38-41 & 5:12-16 (17-26)

This summer we're following Jesus through the gospel of Luke... This morning, we'll see that right after Jesus appears on the scene, he begins his healing ministry. Luke pays attention to this, as one would expect, because Luke himself is a physician. So, there are more accounts of Jesus' healings in Luke than in the other gospels. Here is where we pick it up, following Jesus speaking in the synagogue on the sabbath...

Luke 4:38-41

38 After leaving the synagogue he entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked him about her. 39 Then he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. Immediately she got up and began to serve them.

40 As the sun was setting, all those caring for any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them. 41 Moreover, demons also came out of many, shouting, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Messiah.

After this, Jesus calls his first disciples to follow him; and we have more accounts of Jesus calling people to following him sprinkled in between these accounts of Jesus' healing ministry. We'll talk about this next week. Immediately following the initial call to discipleship, Luke tells us this:

Luke 5:12-16

¹² Once, when he was in one of the cities (Luke uses that phrase from time to time; it's his way of saying, "Also typical of Jesus' ministry is the following..."), there was a man covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." ¹³ Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do choose. Be made clean." Immediately the leprosy left him. ¹⁴ And he ordered him to tell no one. "Go," he said, "and show yourself to the priest, and, as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing, for a testimony to them." ¹⁵ But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. ¹⁶ But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.

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, 40 days fasting and being tested in the wilderness, and his first appearance teaching in the synagogue, *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—physically, emotionally, spiritually, and in all the ways we think of healing—a holistic, making well of the whole person.

In Luke's gospel, in particular, we have a string of healings, right out of the gate, as you just heard. And there is one more we didn't read, which follows the

passage I just read, where Jesus is teaching in a house, and some friends carry a paralyzed man on a cot, but because the crowd is so large they can't get in, so they go up on the roof and make a hole in it and lower him down through the roof, and Jesus heals him. That passage is also about Jesus' authority to forgive sins, and he argues with the Pharisees about that, but it's one more stunning healing event to inaugurate Jesus' ministry.

At the end of that passage, by the way, there is a great comment made by people that Luke records for us: "Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe and said, "We have seen strange things today." No kidding!

Jesus' healing ministry is what gained him notoriety. We heard it in both 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, and this is why people flocked to him—partly out of curiosity, partly 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, and 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 they glorify God, 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, Luke 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.

So, this was normal for him, not extra. And, because the call to discipleship, the call to follow Jesus, is placed right smack in the middle of all this (as we'll talk about next week), Jesus intended this to be normal for his followers, too. 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, (quote) "heal the sick, and proclaim to them that the

Kingdom of God has come near to you.” (Luke 10:9) Healing and Kingdom proclamation went together as part of what Jesus’ followers were commissioned to do. They’re 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. It was as normal and regular for Christians 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 builds 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. What we have in Scripture are accounts of physical healing, mostly, but think of what those physical healings represented, and what they led to.

For example, the leper. Lepers, by Levitical law, were kept separate from the rest of the population (think leper colonies). They thought leprosy was contagious so they quarantined persons who had it. So, when Jesus heals the

leper, it initiates a deeper healing. First, Jesus touches him. Think of how long it would have been for him to have felt the touch of another human being; and what that would've meant to him. Then Jesus sends him to have his healing validated by ritual, by someone in authority—that's another layer of healing; let's call it a religious healing. After that, then, he is free to move back into society and function as a member of society. Think of how all of this affects... his relationships, his ability to work and make a living, his sense of himself— with the release of the shame of who he and others saw him to be. Same with the paralytic who was healed.

This is what healing does. It creates 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 in the midst of illness and infirmity. It's a matter of what God is doing.

As we reflect on our accounts from Luke 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 hands, without words

Several are healed by touching Jesus and not the other way around

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; he just heals them without their permission, which seems kind of rude, but who wouldn't want that!

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, **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 our role in receiving, or participating in, the healing ministry of Jesus? Let's look for a moment at the role of faith in these healings from Luke:

In the case of the leper, we see him approach Jesus with humility, but also with boldness. He doesn't make a demand of Jesus, but expresses his belief that Jesus has the authority and the ability to make him clean. He says, "If you choose" or "If you are willing"—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. But we ask, along with the leper, what do *you* want to do?

And it doesn't require 100% faith. Healing is always by *Jesus'* choice, never because of extra effort on a person's part, or by doing or saying things perfectly. We come to him with the faith that we have in our hands, just as it is, and offer ourselves, or another person, just as we 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; it exhibits God's Kingdom. If Jesus doesn't heal, physically/outwardly, that's also part of his 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, God 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, the leper comes in humility and simply places himself in the hands of Jesus and entrusts himself to God's sovereign purpose for him.

The ***friends of the paralytic*** approach Jesus with faith, but they approached Jesus on behalf of someone else. We might think of this as intercessory prayer; where people make a request to Jesus on behalf of someone else, figuratively carrying someone to Jesus. The paralytic's friends *literally* carry him to Jesus (boldly, through a hole in the roof! Jesus seems to be okay with a little property damage for the sake of someone's wellness)—they literally carry him to Jesus, and if we think about it, that's what we do when we pray for others: we carry them to Jesus.

This example shows 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 to the leper "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 all 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.

While in seminary, I took a quarter of CPE (clinical pastoral education; hospital internship) 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 with all kinds of situations, illnesses, and people. 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 sick with pneumonia; in another, a mom with her baby with a high fever.

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 an old 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 grace and 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 are worthy and 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.

We'll talk about this more later as we follow Jesus through Luke, but let me say, now, that participating in healing ministry doesn't mean we perform the miraculous, or that that's the only way that healing happens. You know, make mud and put it on peoples' eyes and all that. Healing can happen because of a kind word. It can happen when we take time to simply be present to 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.

I believe this is so important 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 one of the most important things we can do.

And I want to reiterate that one of the most healing things we can do for others is listen. Simply listen. *Words* can heal, yes. *Listening* can heal even more. Listening is a balm to the soul.

Our black and native American friends would say that a big part, perhaps the main part, of racial healing is listening—listening to the hurt and the history. Listening leads to healing, healing leads to reconciliation, reconciliation leads to peace, and a just society.

Luke 18:35-f: blind man calling out for mercy by the side of the road; Jesus walks over to him and asks, “*What do you want me to do for you?*” Perhaps that is a question we can ponder this week. What do you want Jesus to do for you? Or maybe you can ask that on behalf of someone else—what do you want Jesus to do for *them*.

We Come to You For Healing, Lord