February 3, 2019

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Sermon: The Lure Of A Cure

The Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 103:1-18

1 Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.
2 Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—
3 who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,
4 who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
5 who satisfies you with good as long as you live[a] so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.
6 The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.
7 He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.
8 The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
9 He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.
10 He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.
11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
12 as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.
13 As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.
14 For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.
As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.


When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Sermon: The Lure Of A Cure

First: a confession.
It is sort of a violation of the lectionary to be preaching on Thomas in February. This is a classic “Eastertide” story, a story of Jesus’ appearance after the Resurrection. We don’t typically hear it in this period of time between Christmas and Lent. It’s a kind of spoiler alert, a peek around the corner.

So that’s one thing. But also – it’s a curious choice for a sermon about healing. The New Testament is full of healing stories. There are 41 distinct accounts of physical or mental healing in the Gospels alone, and of course the text hints at many more incidents that are not explicitly described.

So...if I am departing from the lectionary and choosing my own text – why have I skipped these 41 stories, only to land on one in which no obvious healing occurs?

There’s no disputing the Biblical narrative – Jesus had the power to perform miracles and those miracles include the ability to heal the minds, bodies, and spirits of those he encountered along the way. This ability was surely one of the primary reason why crowds followed him all around Galilee – they were hungry for the healing he offered.

Furthermore, Jesus often linked healing with faithfulness. He was “greatly moved” by the faith of the soldier in Matthew 8 and he was impressed by the faith of the friends who lowered a man to him through the ceiling of the home in Mark 2. Sometimes he explicitly says, “Your faith has healed you,” as in Mark 5. And sometimes, of course, faith played no obvious role at all.

Other famous texts in the New Testament imply that these healing powers were not simply in Jesus’ hands but continue in the hands of the church. James 5:14 is sort of the classic example:

“Are any among you sick? They should call the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up” (5:14-15).

I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that these texts have created high hopes and dashed expectations for so many people. They’ve also contributed to the stigma and shame of people with disabilities. Because while there are indeed incredible stories of miraculous physical healing – I have experienced these stories first hand
and I am not disputing them - for every one of these stories there so many more instances of good people who got sick, called the elders, received the oil and prayers, and died anyway.

Not only that, but if we pan out a little bit, we have to acknowledge that everyone eventually dies, right? It’s right there in Psalm 103 – “our days are like grass – the wind passes over us and it is over.” Every one of us will get older, weaker, more prone to sickness. Every one of us will experience a day when our body simply ceases to function. What does it mean to talk about healing in the context of mortality? How many more years did the people whom Jesus healed persevere before they succumbed for some other reason? What does the healing even mean?

In our death-denying society, which worships youth and ability and ease, the enduring presence of fatal illnesses and incidents is offered as evidence that faith-based healing is a sort of self-righteous delusion. At best, it is wishful thinking. At worst, it shames the very people who suffer and die. If they are not cured of their illnesses, what must be wrong with their prayers?

But perhaps we are looking at healing through the wrong lens.

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In her book, “Resurrecting Wounds: Living In The Afterlife of Trauma,” Professor Shelly Rambo looks at the story of Doubting Thomas from the perspective of trauma. There is a mountain of data now about what happens in the wake of a traumatic event. We don’t just bounce back from the events that shake us to our core. The effects of these events linger in our bodies, like ghosts. Well after our bodies are physically healed, we struggle to feel hopeful or whole. This can be discouraging, or even shameful, in a culture which constantly positions wellness as the endgame.

Rambo calls this the “lure of the cure.” We believe our work to be unfinished until we are cured of what ails us. But the science of trauma tells us that healing is almost never this simple or linear. “Cure implies an end, closure, and resolution,”

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she writes. “Healing, on the other hand, is messier. Healing is a way without assurance of an end.”

Healing is a way without an assurance of an end.

This is a fascinating way into today’s Gospel reading. Jesus has been arrested, beaten, and executed. The disciples watched this from a distance before fleeing in fear and sadness. Traumatized. They are huddled in the upper room, a place where they shared communion with their friend just hours earlier, before it all fell apart.

The doors are locked. And yet Jesus comes and stands among them.

He is not a ghost. He has resurrected from the dead. How are they to know that he is not a ghost? He offers them his wounds.

The resurrection is often presented to us as the ultimate healing – the ultimate triumph of life over death. It’s been baked into theologies that suggest that there is nothing we cannot achieve in Christ because Christ submitted to the powers of death and emerged undefeated.

But in fact, if this text is to be our guide, we can see that Jesus submitted to the powers of death and emerged alive and deeply wounded. Jesus, the One who healed so many, emerges from death wearing his brokenness on his sleeve. He invites his friends to touch the wounds. In one particularly graphic moment, he invites them to put their fingers into his side.

To me it’s fascinating that Jesus offers his woundedness as proof of his resurrection. A perfect body, it seems, would be suspect. It wouldn’t contain the full story of everything that came before.

According to Dr. Rambo, the work of treating post-traumatic stress revolves around gentling revealing the full story, revealing the brokenness that we are so inclined to hide. It’s about recognizing, however gradually, the new life that is woven into old fractures. The temptation is to think that we can have one without

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the other. But this is rarely the case, in body or spirit. Healing is wed to wholeness, and wholeness literally requires the integration of all parts.

How profound then, to have a faith that encompasses the fullness of both life and death? The best of Christian theology does exactly that. Jesus moved through the world as single person in a particular time and place. He has this extraordinary ministry of preaching and teaching and healing, but it is actually quite limited in scope. There’s a very telling moment in Luke 4. Jesus has just healed Simon Peter’s mother. As the sun rises, he slips away from the house and the crowds follow him— they have a whole host of other sick people that need attention. But Jesus insists that it is time for him to leave. “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also,” he says (4:42-44).

It’s a moment that points to the scale of Jesus’ ministry. He heals people – yes. He creates spaces of hope and possibility and reconciliation. But there are so many other people who missed that encounter by just miles and minutes. Jesus’ mission doesn’t ever seem to have been the physical healing of the entire world. But perhaps the truer picture of what it means to seek healing in Jesus Christ comes to us from the Upper Room of John 20. A broken and resurrected Christ, asking people to touch his wounds, because somewhere therein is the proof of new life.

It’s both a reckoning and reconciliation of everything that came before. It’s a moment of profound truth-telling. It’s a healing that anyone who has suffered can recognize. Because we will never be the same. And yet new life grows from that very same soil. Brokenness and healing are not mutually exclusive.

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I’m calling today a Service of Healing and Wholeness. What does that really mean? I would wager that there’s not a person in this room who doesn’t have someone in their lives who is hanging in the balance. Someone who is walking through the valley of the shadow of death. We ache with our whole hearts for their healing. Or perhaps you carry within your heart a grief for a life that has already ended. A dream that died on the vine. A problem that feels insurmountable. Perhaps the pain you feel is simply the ghost of trauma from so long ago. You never guessed that the ghosts would have lingered as long as they have, and yet here we are.
In the face of all of that, I offer these thoughts.

I believe in miraculous healing. I believe in physical, emotional, and spiritual healing, even cures. It’s not cool to say that, but I’ve seen too much to discount it.

We’ve scarcely begun to scratch the surface of the connections between body and mind and soul. There is power in human touch, in words of affirmation, in physical massage, in acupuncture and yoga and meditation and therapy and prayer. So let’s be humble when it comes to what we know about the potential for healing. When I pray, I ask for cures fairly shamelessly.

And yet.

Perhaps each of these rare and miraculous Healings are symbols, in the end, of the deeper spiritual work we all have to do. Perhaps the real work is the work of wholeness. The work of integrating the fullness of our stories, with all of their blessings and woundedness, and presenting them before God and each other without shame. There can be profound healing in these moments of simple acceptance that God is with us in our pain, that healing springs from unexpected places, that all things can be renewed.

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Almost ten years ago, I took a train from Princeton into New York City for a date with a man I had met online. I was very early in the work of coming out and understanding myself and dating. I was looking for a gay Christian man and it was not easy. That’s why I took a train all the way to New York to meet this guy.

I’ll never forget our conversation, in a little restaurant in the East Village. He was telling me about the time, only a few years earlier, when he had been invited onto the stage of a famous evangelical preacher. This was in front of about a thousand people. This traveling preacher had come to town and claimed to have the power to do miraculous Healings. Even in our day and age there are people who claim this power and they have a considerable following. So this man that I was having dinner with went to this service and there was a moment when an usher was looking for people who were needed healing.
He could barely say the words but he asked if it would be possible to be healed of his homosexuality. The shame had plagued him years, he had kept it a secret from his friends and family, he just wanted to be straight. The usher wrote all of this down on a card and walked away. And that is how it came to be that he was called up onto that stage, in front of a thousand people and this preacher, and asked to tell his story.

He describes his heart beating out of his chest, the stage lights blinding his eyes, the preacher placing a hand on his forehead and asking him if he wanted to be healed.

“Yes,” he said, breathless. “Yes. I want to be healed.”

The preacher started praying and the music swelled and he began to weep and he fell to the floor. The ushers helped him back to his feet and he heard the preacher say, “Congratulations, Child of God. You have been healed.” He walked back to his seat, his eyes blurry with tears, as the audience gave him a standing ovation. And he went home that night believing himself to be straight.

“That is quite a story,” I said. “I don’t know exactly how to say this…but here you are, on a date with me, a man. I think that your healing might have worn off!”

We both burst into laughter and he put his hand on top of mine. “The healing did begin that day,” he said. “It just wasn’t what anyone in that room – including me – could have ever imagined. It was the healing of my shame.”

He didn’t have to tell me the rest because I knew it already. The hard work of truth-telling, coming out, building relationships based on authentic love and not on shame. The healing that grew from that process, so gradually - never once looked like the miracle he had asked for. I knew the whole story.

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May you encounter a healing that transcends not just your pain but also your hopes. May you continue to be surprised by a God who moves through locked doors and to give you a peace that passes understanding. May you discover a
healing presence in the shadow of your suffering, woven through it even, like straw spun to gold.

This is church, friends. Or at least it should be. The place where our brokenness and healing meet in the light of an authentic and inclusive love. Our healing and our brokenness are not mutually exclusive. Which means that the healing can begin right now.

Amen.