

Words of Healing

Sermon Feb. 17 2019

It's hard for me to imagine living in a place where there are essentially no doctors. Here in Boston we are lucky to be surrounded by many of the best hospitals in the world, not to mention all the practices and clinics, specialists from neurologists to podiatrists. Seems there are even more doctors than Dunkin' Donuts around here. But in Jesus' time things were much different. There may have been a few herbalists, and likely the king had a medical advisor, but for the vast majority of people there was no such thing as a doctor, just some home-brewed remedies and fairly short life expectancy.

That's why most of today's story take place in the midst of a throng of people, all seeking out healing. You see, word has spread about Jesus, and – in particular – about his amazing ability to heal what ails you. Leprosy, he can heal it. Withered hand, he can heal it. Blindness, he can heal it. Can't get away from your demons, he can heal it. Your mother in law is sick and you can't catch any fish, Jesus can heal it. So everyone is following, trying to get to this man, just reach out and touch him, just get a little bit of that special something he has. This is probably why he had to climb up a mountainside to get a little peace and quiet for prayer time. But as soon as he's called the disciples by name on that mountainside he brings them down onto the plain, to be amidst the crowd of people.

You see, he wants to share with the disciples what their work will be about. We've been talking for the last few weeks about the call story. A call story is also an initiation, an entrance into a larger experience of transformation. The Disciples have left all that they know. Soon they will be called on to do amazing things. But before they can get to transforming the world, Jesus needs to transform their worldview.

Now, I'll be honest with you. God works in mysterious ways. My very favorite passage of scripture to preach on comes from Luke 6 – but it's the end of the chapter. So we must save that passage for June next week. Suffice it to say the end of Luke 6 packs some whoppers like “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” and “Turn the other cheek” – passages that prove to be much more subversive than you might think. These essentially are the foundations of non-violent direct action. That inspired Ghandi and King and so many others. It's the Call to Action that ramps up the ending of Jesus' first true sermon to his closest companions.

And so between this mountain top moment of the calling of the disciples and the aspirational peak, the Call to Action from this world-transforming sermon, Jesus calls us to descend onto the level plain, to learn a bit about healing.

There's a great multitude of people, from all over, not just Judea but non-Jews all the way from the coast of Tyre and Sidon. All these bodies pushing together, just reaching out and grasping for something. If you thought the sidewalk was crowded during the patriots parade, this was on a whole new level. “And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.”

All of them were healed. What an opening illustration for the table-flipping, world altering sermon that will come next. In fact, because this phrase lies between the action of Jesus laying hands on the crowd for healing, and the sermon that comes next, we could understand the sermon as a continuation of this healing. Those who are not even close enough to see Jesus, let alone touch him, can still hear his words, and can still experience the healing. Perhaps the healing of the sermon reaches even as far as Boston in 2019.

What Jesus offers is not just cure from a disease. Jesus offers true healing – which means “wholeness”. The root word for **"health," "wholeness," and "holy" are the same. So: *To be Healthy... Is to be Whole... Is to be Holy...*** Healing looks very different for different people. In fact, for some it can look less like a blessing and more like a curse. But more about that in a minute.

And Jesus begins to preach. He looks the disciples in the eyes – the text doesn't say just the 12 apostles, but all the disciples, all of the followers – and says:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”

It is as if Jesus lobbed a lightning bolt across the sky. Can't you see the streak of light, the snap of electricity in those words. “Blessed are the poor.” No one had ever said that before. In the Hebrew Bible, it was clear that the rich and full were blessed. Their riches of camels and cattle brought pleasures and fullness to their lives. That is also true of us today in the twenty-first century. The rich and full are the blessed. With enough money to buy a home, pay the bills, go on a vacation every year. The rich are thought to be smarter, quicker emotionally, quicker intellectually, and always able to land on their feet. That is what it is to be blessed. ... But Jesus turns all that on its ear. Jesus turns everything upside down and inside out.

Imagine how this must've felt, to be a poor person, with no recognized value to society, no sense of security, someone the world is constantly spitting on – to be told that – right here and now (notice in Luke the blessings are in present tense) right here and now, every person who is poor is, in fact, told “yours is the Kingdom of God.” The Kingdom of God cannot be taken away from you. No one can repossess your claim on the Kingdom of God. No storm can destroy, no fire consume, no empire steal your true possession, the Kingdom of God. Your dignity is restored. Your security assured. You are the rich one and have a treasure no one can take from you. Jesus brings healing that announces a world turned on its head, that sees the value in people no matter their economic status, that values commitments and stories and love and bravery above social standing and bountiful crops and the flashiest new Mercedes in the driveway.

Jesus brings a blessing of healing to the poor, empowering those who feel they have nothing to give, with a renewed vision of their own value. But this healing, this wholeness, is complex because while it includes comfort it also includes challenge. The poor are told, yes you have gifts that are beyond monetary value – and God is going to need you to give of those gifts generously.

And those who are hungry now, who literally do not have enough to eat. You who cannot consume enough nutrients to carry out the work that God calls you to. You will be, not just fed, but filled! The pain of your hunger, your fear and panic about where to get your next morsel –

these are healed in the promise of Jesus that you will be filled with the bread of life. Strengthened, empowered to do the important Kingdom building work that comes next. The healing is a comfort and a challenge.

Jesus goes on to offer healing to those who weep – not that he will take away all sadness and grief, but that this weeping will mean something, that God sees us in the depths of our despair and is moved by compassion. As John put it last week, God needs your heartache – that’s part of the call. And God will need your laughter too.

The fourth healing blessing is for you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you^[d] on account of the Son of Man. I pray that you’ve never known what it is to be hated, excluded reviled or persecuted because of your faith, but know this... don’t you let those haters convince you you’re ugly or mean or wrong, don’t let those small-minded people tell you that what you believe is pointless or false. As Nancy put it in her sermon, if you want to know whether you’re standing in the council of God, if you’re on the side of what’s right, take a look around. If everyone cheers you on and loves what you have to say, you’re probably doing it wrong. If you’re ruffling feathers and making people nervous, that’s when you’re standing with God, that’s when you’re in the best company. The healing Jesus offers his disciples is assurance that if they are persecuted it’s likely that they’re standing in the council of God.

And then, we get to the woes. You know, I’m someone who believes we are supposed to place ourselves within the scripture lesson and try to figure out what the story is saying to us in our time. But to do so with this passage can be a bit uncomfortable. For I know that, while I may feel poor when the mortgage payment comes out of the account, compared to most of the world I am rich beyond wildest imagining. I also have eaten more than my fill today. And while I’ve ruffled a few feathers in my time, I certainly have never been persecuted for my faith. I doubt many of us have. I’d certainly rather throw my lot in with the blessedes at the beginning of the message than the woe-ers at the end. But, if I’m honest, I know that Jesus calls me to take the later half of the message to heart, even more than the first. Jesus offers healing to those who are rich. A healing that helps re-orient our understanding of riches, of the value we place on others, of the blessings in our hands and how they might be used to create a more level plain. If we have truly received our consolation, our satisfaction, here on earth with our material wealth, if that’s all there is to strive towards, then surely we are lost. But if we can continue working for the consolation of all creation, then we are healed from our greed and materialism. And those who are full. Well, if you’re full you have no openness to anything else. Maybe Jesus’ message of healing for those who are full is a healing that calls for mindfulness about what we consume, how we waste, how we use the things we consume to fill in parts of our lives that could possibly be satisfied in other, more life-giving, more spirit-filling ways. To allow room for openness to God and the transformation of the spirit. And for those who are spoken well about, perhaps the true healing for them is being called out, for the people-pleaser to become the God-pleaser. Sometimes the healing you need is in the form of a mirror reflecting back to you.

Jesus' healing gives us just what we need. The disciples too are in need of something, a better understanding of purpose, an ego check (level plain), a clearer understanding that while they're now the ones called to do thus difficult work of healing they will also be receiving healing.

Why at this point is Jesus making it clear that his community, his followers, will be made up of people who have sought and received healing? Well, biology teaches us that when a broken bone heals, it comes back stronger. So too for the followers of Jesus. Jesus helps us recognize our own need for healing, makes that healing possible in ways we may not have imagined, and helps us to grow stronger through that healing. If we can face our own brokenness, our own vulnerability, with bravery and hope, then we are made ready to face the brokenness and vulnerability of the world, and bring our own healing to it.