



“Healing Balm”
Scripture – John 9:1-41
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, March 22, 2020

On Monday morning I was at the Medical Office Building of an area hospital for my weekly, pre-natal check-up. Immediately inside the main entrance was a make-shift screening station: a folding table with Coronavirus fact sheets and bottles of hand sanitizer, and — stationed behind the table — a hospital employee asking every person who entered the building the following questions:

Have you traveled to an area affected by COVID-19 in the past 14 days?
Have you been in contact with any person who has tested positive for the Coronavirus?
Are you experiencing any of the following symptoms: cough, fever, difficulty breathing?

If you answered “no” to these questions, the employee waved you on to your doctor’s office, where a receptionist repeated the litany:

Have you traveled in the past 2 weeks?
Have you been exposed to COVID-19?
Are you experiencing any symptoms?

Let me say: I fully understand the need for these screenings. And I support the hospital’s policy; it is a critical step in protecting the health and well-being of both patients and medical staff. But the effect of this screening was unnerving. My very presence was cause for concern. It felt like I needed to pass a test to receive medical care.

These are odd times. Anxious times. Surreal times. As with most crises, this pandemic is revealing the best and worst of humanity. The empty shelves at the grocery store, the soaring prices on hand sanitizer and Lysol and toilet paper have all exposed our selfish impulses. Our desperate attempts at self-preservation have caused many to turn a blind-eye to the needs of others and to disregard the well-being of the whole community. On the surface, it seems we are turning inward; it seems we are treating others as competitors for scarce resources and threats to personal safety, *not* as neighbors united in care and concern during this time of crisis.

On every level, this pandemic is testing the strength of our communities. It is already laying bare our tendencies either to pull away or to reach out, to abandon one another in times of anxiety or to turn toward one another in times of stress.

Of course, the impulse to pull away from one another is nothing new. We see this at the very beginning of our story from John. When Jesus and his followers stumble upon a man who has been blind since birth, the disciples’ first impulse is to assign blame: “Rabbi, who sinned — this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Rather

than reaching out with empathy or compassion, Jesus' disciples would leave him to the life they assume he deserves — all because somebody in his family must have seriously screwed up. And in seeing this man's apparent sinfulness, and *only* his apparent sinfulness, they are overlooking his need for compassion, his yearning for connection, his very humanity.

The disciples are not alone in this; they simply see the man who was born blind as the whole community sees him: He is a Sinner, with a capital S. In the eyes of his sighted neighbors, this man's physical blindness *must* be the result of some moral failing. So, he lives his life as a beggar — relegated to the margins of society where his supposed sinfulness will not infect others.

Only Jesus sees this man as he truly is — as someone deserving of dignity, as worthy of grace. He does not ask questions about the man's past. He does not subject him to screening or tests. He simply acts: With a gesture that would make everyone at the CDC squirm, Jesus spits on dusty ground, mixes up some mud, and reaches out to spread this paste on the man's eyes. "Go and wash," Jesus says. Of course, the man does. And he returns able to see.

Now, this miracle *should* have restored the man to his community. That's how it works in the Gospels. Just look at the woman who'd been hemorrhaging for twelve years — the one who reached out to touch the fringe of Jesus' cloak; or at Jairus' daughter, whom Jesus raised from the dead (Mark 5:21-43). When he restored their bodies, Jesus also returned them to family, to community.

But, that is not the case for the man-born-blind. As soon as Jesus opens his eyes, the community begins to squint theirs ... sizing him up, viewing him with suspicion. The neighbors do not recognize him, proving that — all these years — they saw only his status as a beggar, not his status as a child of God. The man's parents, when summoned to the synagogue, give their son a sideways glance and keep their distance. Acting out of fear rather than out of love, they deflect the Pharisee's questions, saying: "Ask him, he is of age." And the religious leaders pepper this man with questions but do not listen to his testimony. They overlook his experience because it doesn't fit within their narrow vision of how God works. They cannot behold this glimpse of grace; they cannot see this miracle for what it is — God's glory revealed in their midst. So, in the end, the Pharisees cast out the man whose eyes have been opened; they bar him from the synagogue and drive him from the community.

Yes, it is nothing new — the impulse to pull away from one another.

I do not think it is mere coincidence that Jesus is out of sight this entire time. From the second the neighbors notice something is up to the moment the Pharisees cast out the man, Jesus is nowhere to be found. It is his longest absence in the entire Gospel of John.¹ And while he's off stage, these people continue acting as those who have *not* seen the Light of the World.

When he returns, however, Christ shows us what the world looks like when light shines in the darkness: Jesus hears that the Pharisees have driven out the man-born-blind and, immediately, seeks him out. Jesus searches for and finds the one whose eyes he has opened — one whom the world views with suspicion, but who — in Christ's estimation — is worthy of grace.

"Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Jesus asks. "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."

For a second time, Jesus draws near to the man who has been blind since birth. Having already opened his eyes, Jesus now reveals himself fully to him as the Son of Man, as God made manifest. He reaches out to the man who has twice been abandoned by his community, who has become the victim of extreme social distancing, and enfolds

¹ Robert Hoch, Commentary on John 9:1-41, www.workingpreacher.org.

him with mercy. And, through this gift of grace — as much as through the miracle that has already taken place — Jesus offers healing to one who has been cast out.

I expect this may be the healing balm we need as well — not a salve made of saliva and dirt, but intimate acts of compassion and kindness that defy every selfish impulse, every instinct to pull away from one another in this time of crisis. It is in these gifts of grace that we, too, will find wholeness during this season of *dis*-connection.

And here's the good news: I have seen such gestures of kindness every day since this all began. Every single day. I hope you have seen them too.

Knowing that this pandemic is taking a particular toll on those on the margins — on neighbors who are economically vulnerable, on neighbors who are at high risk should they contract this virus — our community is stepping up to care for those in need. Even as we keep our distance physically — which, as counter-intuitive as it seems, is one of the best ways we can love our neighbors right now — people are reaching out to touch the lives of others:

I see it in Delaware Food Bank offering drive-thru emergency food pantries throughout the state, to ensure that those struggling with food insecurity still receive the meals they desperately need.

I see it in the messages posted on social networks: neighbors reaching out — sometimes to complete strangers — offering to make grocery store runs or trips to the pharmacy for those who need a helping hand, or simply checking in to see how others are holding up during this season of uncertainty.

I see it in our church family sending emails, making phone calls, reminding one another of the ties of Christian love that bind us together, even when we are far apart.

No, these acts do not mimic Jesus' surprising gesture of reaching out to spread mud on another's eyes. But they do reflect his second healing act — when Christ sought out a man yearning for community's embrace. Our community's everyday, extraordinary gestures are the intimate acts of compassion and kindness that we all crave in this time of crisis. They are the ways we bear witness to the Light that neither sin's shadow nor the shroud of death can overcome. And through these gifts of grace, we glimpse Christ made manifest in our midst; through these gifts of grace we find healing and wholeness.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Eternal God, we find ourselves living in such uncertain and frightening times.

Life has suddenly turned surreal as the Coronavirus spreads rapidly around the globe, infiltrating communities, and infecting thousands with a silent, unseen, deadly disease. We stare at graphs that mark the number of people identified with this fearsome virus and note the exponential leaps from day-to-day. The term “social distancing” now rolls off our tongues effortlessly, as if this term had always been a part of our vocabulary. Financial markets plummet, economies plunge. The word “lockdown” is no longer reserved for incarcerated individuals. God, is this really happening? Some moments it feels like an apocalypse.

Mighty God, in such unnerving times, we pray that you will calm the beating of our hearts with the reassurance that you are like a steadfast shepherd who guides each one of us through dark valleys and toward lush, green pastures. We pray that you will ease our anxiety, by reminding us that we are still connected to one another – we need not face this crisis on our own. We have loved ones and we have our church family. In these unsettling days, may we not hesitate to lean on one another, watch out for one another, and reach out to one another.

Gracious God, we pray that your spirit of wisdom will fill the government leaders of every state and nation that they may make decisions in the best interest of all their citizens. And even though our daily lives are thrown into a tailspin by being directed to shelter in place, we express our enormous gratitude for having a home where we can self-quarantine. May we and our leaders remember that especially in times of crisis, we must be our brother's and sister's keeper.

Loving God, inspire those who are working on a vaccine and cure for COVID – 19, and infuse them with the needed strength and determination to keep forging onward until they spawn the medical breakthrough that is so desperately needed.

Generous God, we give thanks for the physicians, nurses, and hospital workers who are on the high risk front line in combating this disease. We pray for their health and well-being.

We pray for first responders who must respond to dangerous situations, that they may be safe and well.

We give thanks for those who work in drug stores and groceries, and for those working long hours to keep the shelves stocked.

Everlasting God, we pray for those whose lives have been devastated by the death of their precious loved ones. Grant them the assurance that nothing can separate them from your love, and that all who have perished are in your eternal care.

Living Lord, in this time of darkness, may we glimpse your light of life, and may we never surrender to despair. In the resurrection of Christ you have given us reasons to rejoice and to never lose hope.

Now, hear us as we pray for life on earth to be as bright and glorious as the kingdom of heaven.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.