



"Ministry of Healing"
Scripture – Mark 1:29-39
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, March 21, 2021

Have you ever considered the fact that a significant chunk of the gospels is devoted to stories of Jesus healing people? Restoring people to health was a major thrust of his ministry. Peruse the Gospel of Mark and this leaps out. The opening chapter, which describes the initial days of his ministry, includes three different healing stories. Overall, I counted 18 in Mark.

Most healing stories in the Bible are considered miracles. Not surprising when you become familiar with ancient writings. Numerous people were reported to possess the power to heal. In fact, Matthew, Mark, and Luke report that Jesus commissioned his disciples "to heal every disease and every infirmity." (Matthew 10:1). In addition, we read a story in the gospels about Jesus healing a man who had a withered hand. The scribes and Pharisees who witness the healing are not surprised that Jesus had extraordinary powers, they are simply angry that he healed the man on the Sabbath. Further, there are stories of individuals other than Jesus and his disciples who healed people.

Jesus was obviously an extraordinary individual who did remarkable things. I believe he was the best revelation of God – I think of him as a window into the character of God and the best one to show us the way to an abundant life.

When we interpret Scripture, it is vital for us to remember that all of the writings in the Bible were written during pre-scientific times. The rise of modern science that began about 500 years ago, produced a monumental shift in human understanding. Today, we view the processes of the universe in a fundamentally different way.

When the New Testament was written, people believed that Satan ruled the world, and could inflict people with demons. Thus, when Jesus healed someone, people did not imagine he was overcoming an indifferent bacteria or strange new virus, but rather he was liberating people from demons that possessed them. The point I am trying to make is simply that, in ancient times, healing miracles were part of everyone's worldview. They did not think that healing was a supernatural intervention into the natural processes of the world.

Turning to the first chapter of Mark, we learn that although Jesus has recruited only four of his 12 disciples, he embarks on a ministry of healing. He has gone into a synagogue in Capernaum, which is on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. While Jesus is sharing his wisdom with those who have gathered, he is interrupted by a man with what the New Testament calls "an unclean spirit." Jesus removes the demon from the man and those who are present are amazed at both his teaching and his power to heal.

Picking up with today's reading, Jesus leaves the synagogue and goes to the home of Simon and Andrew which is just a few yards away. Part of the stone walls of both the synagogue and this house still stand. You can walk around these ruins.

Once inside their home, he discovers that Simon's mother-in-law has a fever, and Jesus cures her. Word spreads through the community and within no time a crowd has gathered outside the home. They have brought ill people for Jesus to heal. Mark tells us that Jesus healed "many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons."

The writer of this gospel wants the reader not only to understand that Jesus had extraordinary power, but to glimpse the basic character of Jesus. When people who are hurting show up at the door, Jesus does not keep them waiting while he conducts a strategy session with his disciples. He does not attempt to guard his privacy or to slip out the back door. Instead, he wades into ailing humanity and begins to restore people. Early the next morning after spending time in prayer, he and his disciples are off to new locations where Jesus will encounter more pain and suffering. This becomes the pattern of his ministry. Wherever he goes, he seeks to restore people to health and wholeness. And in doing so, he paints a portrait of the life of faith. He illustrates for his followers the kind of life God urges us to live.

What is vital for *us* to understand is that Jesus expected his followers to carry on his ministry of healing. In Matthew 25 we read about the vision of Jesus welcoming people into the heavenly kingdom because of the way they treated others. Jesus says, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, ***I was sick and you took care of me***...whenever you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me."

As you know, many people – doctors, nurses, research scientists, therapists, and others – devote their life's work to a ministry of healing. However, ***everyone*** who follows Jesus is expected to be engaged in this crucial ministry.

Keep in mind that healing happens in many ways. Can you recall your parents caring for you when we were ill? Part of the healing came from medicine they gave you and part came from their love and empathy, and kissing your scrapes, and finding the right band aid.

If you think about it, we have numerous opportunities to promote healing. We can take chicken soup to someone who is ill, listen patiently to someone who grieves a loss, forgive someone who has injured us, speak kind words to lift the spirits of another.

And, today, we have a unique opportunity to encourage healing: **Getting vaccinated**. I hope everyone will keep in mind that getting vaccinated is not simply self-serving. Being vaccinated for COVID -19 is an excellent example of how you can fulfill the commandment of Jesus to "love others as yourself."

As you know, COVID-19 has spread around the globe and, unfortunately, our country has led the world in the number of cases (nearly 30 million) and the number of deaths (over 540,000). And don't for a minute think that these are simply cold statistics about people far away. Some of these deaths have touched our church family. We have lost people we loved. That's why it is critical for us to do our part in ending this pandemic. Getting a vaccine is critical not only for our personal well-being, but also for our families, and for our neighbors.

I suspect that all of us who are over 50, were vaccinated for smallpox. It was a hideous disease. "Prior to the creation of a vaccine in the 19th century, three out of every 10 people who contracted smallpox died. People who survived usually had scars, which were sometimes severe."¹

In 1959, the World Health Organization devised a plan to eradicate smallpox from the planet. However, it sputtered for over a decade due to a lack of funding and a shortage of vaccine donations. In 1966, smallpox was still widespread. But in 1967, an Intensified Eradication Program began and by 1977 smallpox was no more.²

I have no idea how many diseases I've avoided thanks to vaccines, but probably several. When I was a child, I was vaccinated against diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, and smallpox. I was vaccinated for polio, and perhaps typhoid. I've been vaccinated for hepatitis A and B, shingles, pneumonia, and more common strains of flu. Most of you have also received several vaccinations.

Today our challenge is to rid the world of COVID-19. However, while many eagerly await their opportunity to get vaccinated, there are many who are skeptical about the vaccine. One of the prevalent myths floating around is that the vaccine can give you COVID-19. That is simply not true. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states specifically: "None of the authorized and recommended COVID-19 vaccines contain the live virus that causes COVID-19."

Last Wednesday, our church family hosted a Community Vaccine Event. Thirty Westminster members and staff (65+) along with 177 members of our community were vaccinated because we opened our doors to serve as a vaccination site. Our event was focused on reaching underserved populations in our community and at least half of those vaccinated were racial minorities, low income individuals, and members of the Muslim community. People came on walkers and canes, and in wheelchairs. People were joyful and very grateful for the opportunity. Anxiety levels dropped as people realized that with a shot in the arm, their chances of dying from COVID-19 were plummeting.

You may feel lousy for a day after receiving the vaccine. Camilla and I both had flu-like symptoms the day after receiving our second dose. However, as the CDC makes clear: "This is normal and *a sign that your immune system is learning how to recognize and fight the virus* that causes COVID-19."³ We celebrated our aches and kept telling each other: "It's working!"

After you are vaccinated, I hope you will tell your friends and family. We received our second dose on my birthday and I told everyone with whom I spoke that it was my best birthday present ever. After all, that vaccine may save my life, may save the life of my loved ones, and may save the lives of people I do not even know. Could there be a better gift?

It's imperative for each of us to share our story because we need to win over a substantial number of skeptics if we are to reach herd immunity. Reaching herd immunity is imperative to halt the spread of COVID-19. That will protect people who cannot get vaccinated, such as newborns, and it will reopen our doors to the world.

I hope you will view your vaccination as one of the ways you can carry on the healing ministry of Jesus, fulfill the commandment of Jesus to love our neighbors as ourselves, and a beautiful way to embody the Golden Rule by doing to others as you would want them to do to you.

NOTES

1. <https://www.cdc.gov/smallpox/history/history.html>
2. Ibid.
3. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/facts.html>

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of the Cross and the Empty Tomb —
Long ago you entered our broken world that we might know
the height and depth and breadth of your love for us.

You, the Word-made-Flesh, touched the flesh of lepers
and heeded the cries of the hungry;
you wept at the tomb of Lazarus
and pondered death in Gethsemane's darkness;
you began your life as a refugee and ended your life upon a Roman cross.
You are no stranger to suffering, O God.
So we know that you are present
in the midst of illness, of sorrow, of uncertainty,
of pain, of turmoil, of injustice ...

God-with-Us –
We weep with those who are suffering this day.
And, Lord, we know the list is long.
We lift up those most affected by the pandemic:
those who are battling the disease, those who have been left destitute,
those who have lost dear ones and now navigate the wilderness of grief —
often in isolation, often deprived of ritual.

We lift before you those who suffer because of misdirected anger and misplaced blame.
Today we weep with our Asian American siblings,
who have been targets of hate and harassment since the Coronavirus reached our shores.
And, though we do not know what motivated the violence we witnessed in Atlanta,
we do know that our neighbors of Asian descent are feeling more threatened, more afraid.
God, be with the families of those slain, with the people of Atlanta,
and with the Asian American community in this season of sorrow.
And help all of us who follow you to respond to the suffering we see
by being a more compassionate presence in our own communities.

Like those who flocked to you long ago, we come to you for healing, Lord.
We seek healing for ourselves, for our families, for our friends,
for our hurting communities, and our weary world.
Heal our divisions, mend our brokenness.
Make us well in body, mind, and soul, that we may serve you with all that we are.

This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ and offer the words he taught us,
saying together:

**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.**