

“His Healing Hands”

February 8, 2015

God Revealed series – 5th Sunday after Epiphany

Maybe you’ve noticed that the Gospel of Mark is short and to the point. The Gospel writer uses “at once” and “immediately” a lot! And he doesn’t take time for any birth story about Jesus. He dives right into John the Baptist announcing that the Messiah has come. He’s here!

And it’s in one day that we see Jesus bringing the Kingdom of God in its fullness. First in the synagogue he exorcises a demon. Remember: “Be silent! Come out!” Then he moves into a home - where one of his disciples lives - and heals his mother-in-law who is sick. He takes her hand and helps her up. She proceeds to get up and serve Jesus and the others.

It’s all told very quickly - this healing story. But I invite us to notice a few things. First, notice how Jesus is on the move. First, the synagogue where religious leaders gather - and even where those who are struggling with life come in! Right away, he moves out of the synagogue and into a home. Whether public or private, Jesus is teacher and healer. His ministry transforms lives.

Second, consider that Simon Peter’s mother-in-law is a powerful witness to Jesus’ power and healing. Maybe you’re thinking...OK, he heals her and she keeps on cooking and cleaning and serving. But it’s much more than that. Her service to Jesus and the disciples isn’t simply a woman doing the things she always did in those days. She is a witness to God’s grace.

She is healed, and she responds by serving others. We don’t know if she says anything, but we know she does something. Her role isn’t small, and we need to take notice. She isn’t simply healed, but she’s restored to wholeness. And she serves out of gratitude for God’s grace.

Jesus has the power to heal because he is the Son of God. He doesn’t wait for a big audience. He isn’t interested in increasing his reputation, although the news attracts so many that they gather at the door of the house. Jesus isn’t looking for fame; he’s aware and deeply affected by people in need of healing. He’s a compassionate healer.

For this woman, her illness is a barrier to wholeness. She couldn’t carry out her everyday duties. The illness not only affected her physical health, but her emotional and mental health, too. Consider how you function when something is physically wrong. It isn’t easy to live the same way as before. Body, mind, and spirit are connected.

Our social life is affected, too. We can feel isolated and alone. Jesus knew her struggle and restored her to full health. She is liberated. She is literally raised up and resumes life. Jesus' healing restores her to social wholeness. His ministry is radical because as he heals people who are ill and ostracized, he threatens the social order that has been in place.

She begins to serve Jesus and his disciples. Her response isn't about doing "woman's work." It's about serving. She's the first servant in the Gospel, and her action helps to show that the Kingdom of God is happening right now!

Healing is never the end of the story. Too many times, we experience God's healing power, and then do nothing. We keep on living and offer no response or gratitude, as if it's no big deal. We don't talk about it. We don't do anything more.

But we have a responsibility. Jesus' healing power equips us to serve him. We can't receive such a blessing and then turn away from the call to follow Jesus. His healing power sends us onto servanthood – onto being disciples who serve in his name and for his sake. Renewed health is this woman's impetus for serving. What a way to respond to God's work in our lives! Out of gratitude for Jesus' love and mercy to us, we serve him.

For many of us, healing brings many images - some very positive and some negative. We might think of miracles - healing that can't be explained - or struggles when healing we hoped for didn't come as we thought it would - or those who take advantage of others by promising something that they can't deliver on.

I want to make a clear distinction today. When we talk about healing prayer, we're not necessarily talking about cure. Healing is sometimes misconstrued by those who exploit God's power for personal gain. Healing doesn't come from us or through us or because of us. Healing comes in many ways, too, and God works through medical professionals and others to bring healing. Healing comes from God through Jesus Christ. We simply participate in it by God's grace.

When we talk about praying for healing for someone, we're asking God to be God - for God to be a source of strength and help, for God to be a powerful presence and stronghold, for God's wisdom to be with us, for God's grace and love to be shown through God's people.

My first experience of a healing service happened in seminary. It wasn't someone healing me or taking away the problems I was facing. It was Jesus' power coming through others to bring healing, wholeness, and most of all – hope and peace at a time when I needed it desperately.

I've experienced healing ministry as part of our community Ash Wednesday service in Muskegon. The opportunity for people to receive ashes as a reminder of our

mortality and then come forward for the laying on of hands and healing prayer, spoken and unspoken, is powerful.

And as a church family, we share the power of healing prayers. When we gather for prayer with someone who is ill, or pray for ourselves or on behalf of others in hospital rooms, I experience God's grace. Allowing ourselves to be loved and cared for and prayed for by one another is a true gift.

Healing prayers don't promise that everything will get better right now, but they remind us to be faithful to the Good News. As Daniel Benedict says, healing prayer "bridges alienation, swallows isolation, breaks suffering, and open discouraged human spirits." What a gift to the church!

Frederick Buechner gives some advice about how to approach the ministry of healing: "Don't try too hard to feel religious, to generate some healing power of your own. Think of yourself instead (if you have to think of yourself at all) as a rather small-gauge, clogged-up pipe that a little of God's power may be able to filter through if you can just stay loose enough." I read a simple, but profound line in a kid's book that said: God will help you help.

We can tap into God's power of healing through Jesus Christ. We can be compassionate just as Jesus was when he saw people in need. We can listen. We can offer prayer. We can be a friend. We can lift each other up, both literally and figuratively. To be a healing presence, we must pay attention to our relationship with God. With simple faith – not the right words, we tap into a power that is greater than we can think or imagine.

So, Jesus is on the move. The people who experience healing are called to serve. And Jesus is clear that his ministry of teaching and healing isn't something that will be local. His words and actions aren't meant to stay in one place for just certain people. This is what Epiphany is all about!

Remember that it's this "wow!" "aha!" time when we realize the power of the incarnation - that God would come to be with us and among us - and that God would show grace in healing and restoring people to wholeness. We are a part of that ministry in the name of Jesus. We are his healing hands. We are his healing words. We are his healing touch.

Friends, showing compassion makes us vulnerable because we admit our own need for Christ's compassion. When we know our need, we know better how it feels to those who suffer. We must seek healing, too.

MOVE INTO HEALING PRAYER

We have that opportunity today—to receive healing prayer as a symbol of God's love in Jesus Christ. Everyone is welcome to come forward. There are prayer teams

who are ready to pray with you. You may offer a specific prayer request - or you may simply come forward and say “unspoken.” The touch from another person is a representation of the presence of the living Christ who is with us as we seek healing and wholeness.

We don't pretend that this prayer time will take away the things we deal with everyday. But we do believe that God is with us, helping us to deal with the everyday. We believe that God's will for us is to be whole persons—called to go on the journey of faith toward holiness of heart and life.

Whether you come to receive prayer or not, reflect on where you need healing in your life. God knows your pain, even if you've never spoken about it. God knows you because you are God's beloved child.

Will you pray for God's healing in your life—in personal struggles and temptations, in broken relationships with those you've hurt and those who've hurt you, from emotional pain that you've carried, from the obstacles you've placed that work against spiritual wholeness?

AFTER HEALING PRAYER

May you be “at peace” this day in the name and power of the One who came to heal, restore, and save. Amen.