

“The Healing Touch”

Mark 1:29-39

In the verses immediately preceding our gospel text, Jesus is in Capernaum, a town on a hill overlooking the north end of the Sea of Galilee. I’ve been blessed to visit Capernaum on two trips to Israel and stand on the floor of the remains of the synagogue where Jesus was teaching and healing. It is a beautiful, spirit-filled place.

On this occasion, Simon is in a hurry for the worship service to be over because his mother-in-law is ill and he believes Jesus can heal her. There is a sense of urgency in verse 29 where we read, “As soon as they left the synagogue” or another translation reads, “immediately after leaving the synagogue,” “they entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John.” “Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once.”

“Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.” Not only does Jesus cause the fever and symptoms of illness to leave, but her recovery is so complete that she feels good enough to get out of bed and serve them dinner! They probably even got pie for dessert!

Some modern day women have remarked about the overt sexism in this scene. The mother-in-law is healed because the guys are hungry and she can resume fulfilling her socially prescribed functions in providing hospitality to the

guests. Certainly those stereotypical gender expectations existed in that culture and to some degree, continue to exist in our own culture. It's been my experience that women bake many more pies than men. But I think the much more important point is that her response to Jesus' act of healing was to begin to serve. The very point of Jesus' ministry with regard both to himself and to all whom he healed and called, was "not to be served but to serve."

Of course, Simon's mother-in-law was not the only one. Over and over, the New Testament record tells similar stories – the blind were given sight, the lame were made to walk, the broken were made whole. Nearly a fifth of the gospel record is about Jesus' miracles and the discussions they occasioned, and that includes fourteen distinct instances of physical and mental healing. And Jesus was not the only healer – the disciples were involved as well. In fact, when Jesus sent seventy of them out two by two as advance teams to the towns on the planned itinerary, part of their instructions were to "cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you'" (Luke 10.9).

The healings continued long after that first generation of believers was gone from the scene. In fact, in the second century, a pagan critic of Christianity by the name of Celsus complained that the church kept going and growing by attracting "the sick, the fools and the sinners." The sick would not have come unless they believed that here they would find a cure.

However, by about the fourth century, the church's ministry of healing began

to deteriorate – the joyous expectancy of those who had surrounded Christ during his earthly walk was no longer there; the incredible loving fellowship that had characterized the early church (especially in times of persecution) was just a memory; other methods of healing were being developed by medical science; the conversion of the emperor Constantine insured the acceptance of Christianity and made it “the thing” to call oneself a Christian. In other words, the church was not the same, and neither was its ministry. Too bad.

Jesus clearly believed in physical healing. Most Christians continue to believe in healing (we pray for people’s health regularly), and scripture makes clear that healing is part of our ministry. But to find fourteen modern incidents of legitimate cure such as we encounter in the gospels would be quite a chore. The ministry of healing has fallen away to almost nothing.

What can we do to return the healing touch to its rightful place in the church? First, there must be a decision to even consider it. Most mainline Christians have little or no understanding of any healing ministry other than what we might occasionally encounter on television when we land on the wrong channel. What we see there we find at best embarrassing and at worst fraudulent. If healing is to regain its rightful place in the work of the church, we must commit ourselves not to abandon it to the religious fringes, and then we must do some serious and careful study with an eye to getting ourselves back to business.

Start with scripture, of course. Read the accounts of healing to learn what

went on. Do you need instructions? The epistle of James has them: “Are any among you sick? They should call for 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 (or make them whole), and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven” (James 5:14-15 NRSV). Does the church today approach illness that way? Not often. And the reason is, when we get sick, our habit is to call the doctor, not the church. A better way would be to call both!

What about healing methods? Doctors and nurses and hospitals and medicine all have their place in a healing ministry. God has graciously given us the advances of medical science to our incredible benefit. But if you ask any doctor or nurse, they will be the first to affirm that medicine has its limits – there is a spiritual dimension to us that contributes to our overall well-being. Jesus knew that, of course, and the gospel record has him using different approaches as each case warranted: He called upon the faith of the person to be healed, or, in some cases, the faith of bystanders; he prayed, he commanded, he forgave, and he touched. Those same techniques are appropriate for us today.

What should we expect of a healing ministry in the twenty-first century? Will people hobble down to the chancel on crutches, then fling them away after prayer and anointing and run back up the aisle or will healing be more gradual? Our task is simply to join in faith and prayer and love and expect something to

happen. There will be times when, despite all our prayers and anointing, healing does not come in the way we ask – sometimes there has been too much physical damage, and God’s most gracious act will be to let life mercifully end. Those decisions are not ours; rather they are rightfully in the hands of a caring and loving God.

There is much to learn about our ministry of healing because the subject has been neglected for so long. If the church is to regain its healing touch, the church has to, as the commercial says, *Just do it!*

Scripture does not reserve this healing work to a certain favored few. There is no question that some individuals do have a particular gift, but the ministry is committed to the church – it is the church that is the body of Christ, Christ’s arms and legs; it is the church that lays hands on the sick and anoints with oil. Just as in any area of our work, we are in this together.

Last summer we saw the sequoia trees of California towering as much as 300 feet above the ground. Strangely, these giants have unusually shallow root systems that reach out in all directions to capture the greatest amount of surface moisture. Seldom will you see a redwood standing alone, because high winds would quickly uproot it. That is why they grow in clusters. Their intertwining roots provide support for one another against the storms. When we gather together, we provide similar support. Pain and suffering and illness come to all of us. But, just like those giant sequoia trees, we can be supported in those difficult times by

the knowledge that we have one another; we are not alone. We are the body of Christ together.

Finally, I'd like for us to turn to page 276 in the front of the red E.L.W. to the service for healing. We use this service the first Saturday night of each month at our 5:30 service. **(Read the introduction)** We will use this service this morning. You will be invited to come forward to the kneeling rail in a few minutes for the laying on of hands and prayer if you wish. If you'd like more specific prayer, bring the yellow sheet in your bulletin with you after filling it out.

#610 - O Christ, the Healer, We Have Come

#612 - Healer of Our Every Ill