

“Healing”

Luke 5:12-16

When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or curses, have chosen to rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand.

Henri Nouwen

Claire loved her busy, Metropolitan Church. It was where she connected with her best friends, where she met her husband, where she supported and served a homeless ministry, where she fit. When her husband secured a job on the church staff and Claire learned she was pregnant life seemed to be falling into place.

“Two months before the baby was born, our house flooded and we had to move out,” Claire wrote. “One month before the baby was born, my parked car was hit and was rendered inoperable. One day before the baby was born, he stopped moving.”

“I didn’t know that healthy, full-term babies could be born stillborn,” she said. “I went to the hospital with hope and fear. They never found a heartbeat.”

The church rallied, helping with funeral costs and meals, even providing a cabin for a weekend getaway for Claire and her husband. But when the couple returned to face down the long journey through grief, they found themselves alone.

“There are no worship songs for those mourning a traumatic death,” Claire wrote. “There is no testimony about feeling forsaken when God does not intervene to save a baby.

We wanted so desperately for our church and pastor to struggle with us, to question, to face this ugly, brutal truth.” But Claire’s agony was met largely by platitudes – Bible verses, theological answers, promises of better days ahead.

Claire found healing outside the church walls – in counseling, among a couple of close friends, on Internet forums where faith, doubt, and grief were discussed openly. Eventually she and her husband connected to another church, but Claire still finds herself struggling to worship at times.

“My counselor says that being part of a church in the midst of grief can be like having ten thousand antennae,” she said. “Anything and everything hurts”.

Over the past 40 years I’ve known people like Claire, people who fit right into the church *until . . .*

The divorce.

The diagnosis.

The miscarriage.

The depression

Someone comes out.

Someone asks a question.

An uncomfortable truth is spoken out loud.

And what they find is when they bring their pain or their doubt or their uncomfortable truth to church, someone immediately grabs it out of their hands to try and fix it, to try and make it go away. Bible verses are quoted. Assurances are given. Plans with ten steps and measurable results are made.

With good intentions tinged with fear, Christians scour their inventory for a cure. But as our 7 new Stephen Ministers learned in these last months, “God is the cure-giver, and we are the caregivers”.

There is a difference between curing and healing, and I believe the church is called to the slow and difficult work of healing. We are called to enter into one another’s pain, anoint it as holy, and stick around no matter the outcome.

In her book *Jesus Freak*, Sara Miles explains it like this: “Jesus calls his disciples, giving us authority to heal and sending out. He doesn’t show us how to reliably cure a molar pregnancy. He doesn’t show us how to make a blind man see, dry every tear, or even drive out all kinds of demons. But he show us how to enter into a way of life in which the broken and sick pieces are held in love, and given meaning. In which strangers literally touch each other, and in doing so make a community spacious enough for everyone. As our 6 new members have learned in our classes, we have many ministries that help us be present with one another in making our Divinity community spacious enough for everyone.

The thing about healing, as opposed to curing, is that it is relational. It takes time. It is inefficient, like a meandering river. Rarely does healing follow a straight or well-lit path. Rarely does it conform to our expectations or resolve in a timely manner. Walking with someone through grief, or through the process of reconciliation, requires patience, presence, and a willingness to wander, to take the scenic route.

But the modern-day church doesn’t like to wander or wait. The modern-day church likes *results*.

Convinced the gospel is a product we've got to sell to an increasingly shrinking market, we like our people to function as walking advertisements: Happy, put-together, finished—proof that this Jesus stuff WORKS! Such a culture generates pews of *Stepford Wife*—style robots with painted smiles and programmed moves. At its worst, it creates environments, where abuse and corruption get covered up to protect reputations and preserve image. “The world is watching,” Christians like to say, “so let's be on our best behavior and quickly hide the mess. Let's throw up some before-and-after shots and roll that flashing footage of our miracle product blanching out every sign of dirt, hiding every sign of disease”.

But if the world is watching, we might as well tell the truth. And the truth is, the church doesn't offer a cure. It doesn't offer a quick fix. For our 6 new members the church offers death and resurrection. The church offers the messy, inconvenient, gut-wrenching, never-ending work of healing and reconciliation. The church offers *grace*.

Anything else we try to peddle is snake oil. It's not the real thing.

As Brené Brown puts it, “I went to church thinking it would be like an epidural, that it would take the pain away . . . But church isn't like an epidural; it's like a midwife . . . I thought faith would say, ‘I'll take away the pain and discomfort, but what it ended up saying was, ‘I'll sit with you in it.’”

There is a faith healer in Tennessee who understands this better than most. Becca Stevens is an Episcopal priest from Nashville and the founder of Thistle Farms, a social enterprise that trains and employs women recovering from abuse, prostitution, addiction, sex-trafficking, imprisonment, and life on the streets.

As the women heal through the therapy and community offered by the Magdalene program, they offer healing to others through the aromatic bath and body products they make from essential oils and sell in stores and online. At Thistle Farms, healing smells like lavender, tea tree, peppermint, and vanilla. It feels like lotion and body balm massaged into the skin. It looks like a flickering candle, and sounds like the whistle of a teapot singing from the new Thistle Stop Café. And it takes time.

“In making and selling oils,’ Becca writes, “we are each reminded that healing is not an event, but rather a journey we walk as we make our way back to the memory of God.”

That journey isn’t always a smooth one. Although 72 percent of women who join Magdalene are clean and sober two and a half years after beginning the program, like any other recovery group, this one knows the sting of disappointment, failure, wrong turns, and relapse. But love, Becca says, “carries us beyond the narrow path of believing that healing is moving from diagnosing to cure . . . Healing is a natural outcome of love. As we learn how to love, we learn how to heal.”

In addition to her work at Thistle Farms, Becca advocates for creative use of healing oils in churches – not as a panacea or magic charm, but as a gift, an outward sign of inward grace. Why settle for just a drop of oil at the kneeling rail, she argues, when you can fill an entire sanctuary with sweet aroma and engage all the senses in worship? At her own church, a table set with a variety of essential oils – lavender, cinnamon leaf, lemongrass, jasmine, geranium, balsam, myrrh – invites parishioners to make their own blends for anointing the hands and feet of the people they love and serve.

Becca concocts special blends for expectant mothers, couples in premarital counseling, those who are sick, those embarking on exciting new journeys, and those traveling difficult roads of healing. The scent, combined with a prayer and gentle touch, can have a powerful healing effect on a person, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. And the time and intention it takes to create a custom scent signals a commitment to stick around for the long haul.

Ultimately, an anointing is an acknowledgement. It's a way to speak to someone who is suffering, and without words or platitudes or empty solutions. Instead, *this is a big deal, this matters, I'm here*. In a world of cure-alls and quick fixes, true healing may be one of the most powerful and countercultural gifts the church has to offer the world, if only we surrender our impulse to cure, if only we let love do its slow, meandering work.

May the peace of God . . .

ELW #603 --- God! When Human Bonds Are Broken