

Series: The Words of Jesus on Healing
Today: Healing and Forgiveness
Text: Luke 5:17-26

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, March 8, 2009 (Second Sunday in Lent)
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

Friday morning I found myself in our doctor's office for a follow-up visit to my annual physical. I am grateful for a family practitioner who is also a member of our church looking out for my well-being, and I am also grateful that so far I have never given him much to worry about. So far, I seem to be a pretty healthy 63-year-old man.

As I was sitting there, I was reflecting on how much health care has changed in my lifetime. My doctor, Dr. Tim Riley, is in his early 30's, and I was thinking how he never really knew the kind of health care I received as a child; a time when there weren't as many specialties nor as many treatments available to deal with disease. Your doctor was a trusted part of your support network. He or she, mostly men 40-50 years ago, was high touch and low tech. He followed you through from diagnosis to treatment, and he may have even taken out your tonsils or other minor surgeries. Most of all, he took time to understand your family so he could treat you appropriately.

I had been doing some reading in preparation for my sermon, and I came across a survey taken by the American Medical Association in the mid 1980's in a book by Bruce Larson entitled, *There's A Lot More to Health Than Not Being Sick*. The survey asked this question: "*What percentage of all the people you see in a week have needs that you are qualified to treat with your medical skills?*"

To my surprise, the physicians surveyed said the average number of patients they saw who really needed them was 10%. In other words, by their own estimate these

doctors said that 90% of the people they see in an average week have no medically treatable problem. Now they had real symptoms and real diseases, but the treatment of those diseases went beyond what doctors were trained to do in medical school. Heart patients and diabetes patients needed lifestyle changes to lose weight, get sleep, stop smoking, or some other form of behavior change. Doctors weren't trained to deal with these matters, and they can't bill insurance for the time spent to address them.

The survey went on to ask what the doctors did for these people, and most of the respondents said they prescribed some form of medicine to help them cope better with the stresses of life. When asked what they would have liked to do for their patients, most of the doctors said they would like to have had the time to spend an hour a week talking to their patients about their lives, their families, and their jobs. They wish they had more time to get to the heart of the matter; the root of the problem.

Twenty years ago doctors wanted more time to help their patients address the pressures of their daily lives, and twenty years later they have less time than ever. Every 12 minutes they have to move on to the next patient whether the one they are seeing has all their questions answered or not. So when Jesus speaks to the paralytic man who had been lowered through the roof, his response may have been on the cutting edge of 21st century medicine. He spoke to the deeper need of the man and not just the symptoms. He said, "*Your sins are forgiven.*"

Forgiveness and Healing

In the culture in which Jesus lived there was a direct link to illness and sin. If someone was suffering in 30 A.D., the question was not about the nature of the disease. It was about the nature of the sin which had been committed by the person suffering or

his/her parents. Those who became ill had a morbid preoccupation with sin. They spent their time wondering what they had done to deserve their fate. They worried about the things in their lives which cut them off from their experience of God. They didn't have the advancements in modern medicine that we do. They felt that God was the source of all healing, and if they were cut off from God they would not get well.

The religious leaders who observed the healing were upset; not because Jesus healed the man, but because he forgave his sin. From their point of view only God has the power to forgive sins. Jesus gave them a choice. Which is the right thing to do? In a culture where the reason for illness was sin, should he get to the heart of the matter and forgive the sin? Or should he simply heal?

I love Eugene Peterson's translation here. Listen to what Jesus says in The Message Translation: (vv. 22-24) *Jesus knew exactly what they were thinking and said, "Why all this gossipy whispering? Which is simpler: to say 'I forgive your sins,' or to say 'Get up and start walking'? Well, just so it's clear that I'm the Son of Man and authorized to do either or both. . . ." He now spoke directly to the paraplegic: "Get up. Take your bedroll and go home."*

We live in a world that has become very sophisticated in its ability to diagnose and treat physical illness. I am not anxious to return to a pre-scientific understanding of disease and death, but I do find it interesting that medical science has come to acknowledge that there is a vital link between a person's emotional and spiritual well-being and the ability of the physician to use the powers of the body to heal itself. Why is it that some people's immune systems are able to ward off viruses and others are not?

Why is it that some cancer patients are able to live years beyond what is medically feasible and others die prematurely?

Physicians are now looking into the intangibles in the immune system such as the emotional and spiritual stability. They are asking whether or not their patients have the will to live; does life have a sense of meaning and purpose? They are also exploring the negative impact of shame and guilt on one's overall well-being, and these are profoundly theological questions which if our faith means anything, it ought to mean something here.

This is why, when those of you who come forward to be anointed for healing and have someone pray for you, we begin with these words: I anoint you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and assure you that your sins are forgiven. We have the power to forgive given to us in the name of Jesus himself, and it is what so many people need to hear. Some need to hear it to heal emotionally. Others need to hear it to heal physically. Some need it for both.

Do you remember last spring when I preached on the rape of Tamar? We were dealing with a sexual offender in our congregation and how we could be hospitable to him while helping our children feel safe; we were dealing with the issue of sexual abuse. I had no idea what would happen as a result of that sermon, but because I preached it, I have had over a dozen conversations with both women and men who had been carrying in their bodies' years of shame and guilt because they had been raped or sexually abused. For many of them, it was the first time they had ever told their story, and their silence had made an impact on their ability to be in a relationship with people that they loved. That kind of stress will eventually lead to some part of the body breaking down.

While they had done nothing wrong, they needed to hear that their sins were forgiven and that they were entitled to a fresh start. It is a fresh start that only Christ can give.

Carrying Each Other to the Feet of Jesus

That brings us to one other dimension in this story: the faith of the four men who carried the paralyzed man to the feet of Jesus. The healing of the paralytic tends to overshadow this story of faith, but it is important to recognize that without those four men he would have never been healed. Scripture says “When he saw *THEIR FAITH...*” he forgave the sins of the man who was paralyzed. Without their faith, the man would have never been able to get there. When the entry was blocked, these people climbed to the roof, removed the tiles, and lowered the paralyzed man for his audience with Jesus. It is the faith of friends that makes the difference, and this is why it is so important for us to continue our ministry of healing prayer. We can believe for others even when they cannot believe for themselves, and we can intercede for others when they are unable to pray for themselves.

In the church where Cherie and I served in Portland, Oregon we experienced this in a powerful way. There was a woman who lost her 20-year-old son to a motorcycle accident, and the community of faith which carried her to the feet of Jesus.

Shortly after this woman heard the news of her son’s death, members of a small group, which we called Koinonia Groups, arrived to take care of her. That night they allowed her to fall to pieces, and then they helped her to pick up the pieces so she could take care of all the details and begin the process of grief. They had come to pray with her by being with her; not with words alone, but with deeds of love and kindness.

One of the members of that prayer group was a better pastor to this woman than any of the pastors on the staff could have been. Just 18 months earlier she had lost her own 20-year-old son to a drug induced suicide. It was that woman who helped the grieving mother understand what was going on. She had told her, *“Penny, we know you cannot feel the presence of God right now because you have to be angry at someone or something about your son’s death. We are here to tell you that it is o.k. to be angry with God. You may even want to give up on God. I sure wanted to, and we are here to tell you that it is all right to feel that way.”*

“But we are also here to tell you that even though you may want to give up on God, God hasn’t given up on you. We know you cannot believe in a loving, caring God right now. That is why we are here. We came to believe for you until you can believe for yourself again. And you will. It will take time and it will be painful. I know. I have been there, done that and got the T-shirt. But believe me, it will happen. For now, you hold your head high while we bow ours and ask God’s protection and care for you and the rest of your family.”

That woman was right. It did take time, but it did happen. And if you ask Penny today how it happened, she will tell you that her friends carried her; carried her to the feet of Jesus, where healing and wholeness is always possible.

Conclusion

Forgiveness and healing; Jesus practiced both. He knows they go hand in hand. We can’t be healed until we have forgiven others and experience the forgiveness of God for ourselves. In order to get there, we may need the help of our friends to carry us to the feet of Jesus. Thanks be to God for this word of healing and hope. Amen.