

MESSAGE Finding Hope and Healing in Jesus

February 4, 2024

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Last Sunday we enjoyed sharing with people new to First Church about the different ministries we have and how people can become involved in them. Of course one of the things we talked about is our prayer chain. The ministry where people can share their concerns and the people receiving these concerns pray for those people. I know of people who take this ministry to heart very seriously. And I know of people who have experienced answers to those prayers.

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This ministry fulfills the scripture: "carry each other's burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" and "rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep".

We do this to the end that someone can be healed.

Like what the new disciples did when they went to Simon Peter's house.

<sup>29</sup> As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. <sup>30</sup> Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her. <sup>31</sup> So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

<sup>32</sup> That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. <sup>33</sup> The whole town gathered at the door, <sup>34</sup> and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was. <sup>35</sup> Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. <sup>36</sup> Simon and his companions went to look for him, <sup>37</sup> and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" <sup>38</sup> Jesus

replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." <sup>39</sup> So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

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Our prayer chain ministry is like what happened when they all went to Simon's house: they let Jesus know the concern in the house: 'by the way Jesus, my mother-in-law cannot greet you because she is in bed with a fever'

And Jesus went to help. He went to heal. After all – this is a part of his mission. "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind. To set at liberty those who are oppressed and to announce that the time has come when God will save his people."

Jesus read this at the beginning of his ministry from the Isaiah scroll then he looked at everyone and said that this scripture was fulfilled in him. It is like his mission statement.

With that mission of his in mind, he went to where Simon's mother-in-law was and he took her hand and she stood up and was better.

It's one of those stories where you write on your list of prayer concerns that this one was answered. But I have to ask: did Jesus cure her or heal her? And maybe we wonder if there really is a difference.

There is.

A cure is a remedy of symptoms; a removal of disease  
Healing is different. It's more wholistic. Healing is a restoration of wholeness.  
With that in mind, I would say that Peter's MIL was healed. She was restored to her place of honor.

Now some folks have criticized this story.....

But the point of Mark telling the details of this story is to show that the illness that Simon's MIL had meant that she was not able to participate in the honor of providing hospitality which was an ancient virtue. This would have left her feeling not only sick, but out of community, out of touch, not able to have the honor - which was hers to have - to play hostess.

That's healing- having not just the disease removed, but being restored to wholeness in relationships, being restored to wholeness in your life.

We encounter other healing stories in the gospels and find that this is exactly the kind of ministry that Jesus brings....he's not just bringing a cure. Jesus provides healing: a restoration into community and relationship that illness has taken away.

Man on the mat: restored to relationship with God

Woman with a bleed: restored to religious relationship

Leper: restored to relationship with family and community.

Now cures are great, for sure, but healing is a sign of the kingdom of God being present because more than symptoms are erased, community is restored between people.

This is what the stories of healing are all about

They show us how Jesus did the work to bring the kingdom of God....the community of heaven to earth.

And that's what he wants to keep getting on with when the disciples find him later in the story and tell him that people are looking for him.

"your appointment schedule is booked solid Jesus"

But his response is "we gotta get going to other places"

And the story that isn't necessarily expounded upon here but is implicit in the question: "what happens to all those people who are sick or blind or possessed?"

This is one of those difficult points in our faith. When what we pray for doesn't come to pass the way we want it to. When the disease/sickness we've prayed will be taken away isn't.

We can question our faith: *did I not pray enough? Do I not have enough faith? Is there something additionally wrong with me? Did I do something to deserve my prayer not being answered?"*

And it can challenge our belief in God. *"do I not matter to God?" or we can simply get mad at God like Martha did. Jesus got the message that Lazarus was sick but he stayed on where he was. He didn't hurry off to Bethany and when he did finally arrive at Bethany, Lazarus had already died. Martha ran down the road when she heard Jesus was coming into town and said, "Jesus, if you would have been here my brother would not have died."*

I don't know why disease is allowed.

I don't know why suffering is a part of this good creation.

I don't know why some cures are brought and some are not.

I don't know all those answers.

But I do know and trust that God is working to make all things new one way or another.

There is a story of a blind man in John 11.....

And with the story of Lazarus, we know that Jesus delayed in coming; he didn't run off to cure Lazarus right away so that he could do something grander: raise him from the dead.

I know that there are people who are cured of diseases, but still need to be healed in their relationships.

And I know that there are people who carry their illness everyday and live a "whole" life, having received a healing and wholeness that is not evident through physical health.

And so I will continue to trust in Jesus to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

And I will continue to believe that God is at work in Jesus to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind....

And I will continue to trust that God is there in some way bringing healing through holy presence....

In the pastoral care office in MCV of VCU there was a sign that hung over the door reminding all the chaplains of something when we couldn't celebrate that someone's disease had been taken away or when we had to go pray with a family whose child was dying.....

The sign was a quote by someone named Paul Claudel and it said this: "Jesus did not come to explain away suffering or remove it. He came to fill it with his presence."

And I will continue to open myself to a reality that is far greater than physical wellness....because there will come a point where we cannot depend on that....physical bodies will eventually fail. And at that time, there is only God that we can trust in to hold us.

And living like that right now....well, that is where healing begins.