

DOES GOD ALWAYS HEAL?

Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches (3/15/09)

Mark 1: 40-45

When we are young and healthy and all of our body parts are working smoothly, we live as though we have the world by the tail and even though we know differently, we comfortably assume that we are going to live forever. It is not until we get sick or a loved one is challenged by disease or an untimely death that we come to know more about our limited time on this earth and God's presence in the midst of it all. In the thought-provoking little book, **At the Will of the Body**, the medical sociologist Arthur Frank relates how a heart attack at age 39 and then testicular cancer at the age of 40 completely changed his way of living. I share his wisdom often and each time I reread this insightful book, I am touched by Arthur Frank's journey and the knowledge he gained about life from the brink of death. This is some of what he has to say,

“The ultimate value of illness is that it teaches us the value of being alive; this is why the ill are not just charity cases, but a presence to be valued. The only difference between people is not health or illness but the way each

holds onto a sense of value in life. When I feel I have no time to walk out and watch the sunlight on the river, my recovery has gone too far. A little fear is all right. It is all right to know that in a month I could be lying in a hospital bed asking myself how I spent today. Holding onto that question—how did you spend today?—reminds me to feel and to see and to hear. It is too easy to become distracted. When the ordinary becomes frustrating, I have to remember those times when the ordinary was forbidden to me. When I was ill, all I wanted was to get back into the ordinary flux of activity. Now that I am back in the ordinary, I have to retain a sense of wonder at being here at all.

In our Gospel lesson for today, the story of the man with leprosy offers to us a word from God filled with great hope and perspective and reminds us that people with sickness are truly a presence to be valued. In the world of first century Galilee, those who suffered from leprosy were social outcasts and untouchables. People with this dreaded, random disease were excluded from the community and were considered by many to be receiving a punishment from God for their sin.

The book of Leviticus spends two whole chapters teaching priests how to diagnose diseases of the skin, how to pronounce lepers ritually unclean, and how to perform rites of purification should they ever be healed. Lepers were required to wear torn clothes, keep their hair unkempt, cry out, 'unclean, unclean' whenever they went by another human being, and live outside the community in a cave or empty tomb. Furthermore, anyone who touched a leper or was touched by a leper was considered to be unclean and also had to abide by the social and religious conditions of quarantine.

The story of the leper in our scripture invites us to look more deeply into our own lives. What is our sickness? What is it that isolates you and me from the human community, from our families, and from our loved ones and friends? What is it that causes us to feel alone, standing all by ourselves and disconnected from what gives us life?

Is our sickness a physical illness---one that has changed our daily routines of work and leisure and puts stress upon our family and friends? Is our sickness due to an unspeakable grief or tragedy that in a blink of an eye changed our life forever? Is our sickness due to stress because we are working harder and putting in longer hours and still not getting it all done? Is our sickness caused by

something beyond our control or is it self-imposed? Is our sickness maintained by our need to hold on to secrets and behaviors that do more to harm our souls than nourish them? Have we chained ourselves to a pace of life, career path or success formula which is making it impossible to establish, let alone enjoy, life-giving relationships? Is our sickness our relationships, our obsessions, our low self-esteem, our desire for power and control, or our need to prove ourselves and defend our lifestyles?

When the leper asked Jesus to make him clean, he was asking for a chance to re-enter the human community and be made more whole. This leper must have known about Jesus' ministry to those who were ordinarily shunned by the religious leaders of the day and somehow heard about the people whose lives were forever changed by this very unorthodox Jew. In Jesus, the leper saw another way of being human in this world and boldly approached Jesus.

In a sermon entitled, "The Journey Toward Wholeness," Frederick Buechner says, "When we catch of glimpse of wholeness in others, we recognize it immediately for what it is. And the reason we recognize it is that no matter how much the world shatters us to pieces, we carry inside us a vision of wholeness that we sense is our true home and that beckons to us always. It is part of what the book

of Genesis means by saying that we are made in the image of God. It is part of what Saint Paul means by saying that the deepest undercurrent of all creation is the current that seeks to more fully draw us to the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

While our scripture for today is a story of a desperate man of faith who knew what he wanted and expressed no hesitations in asking Jesus for healing, this story is also about the God of great love. When it came to the leper, the text reads, “Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Jesus broke the law when he touched the leper and deliberately took into himself the man’s condition, his isolation and his illness. Jesus gave the leper his life back by restoring him to his place within the human community and because the religious institutions had successfully kept the leper isolated, Jesus’ touch and healing of this man was truly a snub and a threat to the status quo of the temple priests. In the context of first century Jewish culture this holy encounter was truly a radical and revolutionary act!

In a sermon entitled, “The Wounded Healer,” the Rev. John Buchanan says, “Jesus put this lonely, isolated man in a new place. This new place is called God’s kingdom, where all are welcome, where no one is a stranger, where boundaries are generous, broad

and full of windows and doors for those on the outside, for whatever reason, can be allowed to enter and find welcome, hospitality, acceptance, restoration and wholeness once again. That's what Jesus' touch really meant."

Jesus did the unthinkable when he chose to stop, touch and bring healing to a leper. Our Lord's very intentional decision to break with popular prejudice and offer hope and new life to the alienated and hurting in his midst, serves to remind us that our Lord goes out of the way to be with us in the midst of our pain, grief, and despair. We can have hope because our Lord deliberately chooses to bring healing and new life to those whose circumstances have left them broken, alienated, and compromised.

When William Sloan Coffin Jr. was the chaplain at Yale, his college-age son, Alex, died in a car accident. Alex and his friends had been drinking and on the way home, Alex missed a turn, crashed through a barrier, and plunged into the icy waters of a river north of Manhattan. After the memorial service, a woman, wanting to be helpful, approached Coffin and said something about what happened to his son being the will of God. The eloquent Coffin wrote later, "I wanted to grab her by the throat and shout, "Lady, that's blatantly wrong! God didn't cause the accident and it wasn't God's will that

my son died. None of us knows enough about God to ever say that. God doesn't go around the world hurting and killing people. When the water closed in over my son's car, I believe the heart of God was the first of all our hearts to break.”

The story of Jesus healing the man with leprosy is a poignant reminder to us that God goes out of his way to stand with us, to bind up our wounds, and to eventually bring healing and strength to the deep resources within us. God takes the pain and suffering of humanity into himself and offers love and community that broken lives might one day be repaired, broken spirits might be restored and broken hearts might eventually be renewed. God's word to suffering and grieving people at this time and for all time, is not that God caused, willed or even allowed our tragedy or alienation. God's word to us on this day is that God comes to be with us in the midst of our alienation. God is always searching after us to bring healing to our spirits and hearts, and new life to our minds and bodies in ways we could never imagine or do for ourselves.

The story of Jesus healing the man with leprosy also reminds us that there is more to healing our alienation than just a physical healing. We should never take for granted the whole mysterious presence of God in our midst and while the gift of healing and renewal are given

at many junctures in our lives, we do not always get the physical healing we request. In our text for today we are told that after Jesus touched the leper and made him clean, Jesus sternly warned him and sent him away at once saying, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go and show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded.” Jesus obviously knew what a big mouth this leper had!

Some of the commentaries I read about why Jesus asked the healed man to say nothing suggest that while Jesus always sought to bring life and healing to the sick and to the outcasts, he did not see himself as a modern-day faith healer who sought to win converts and boost synagogue attendance based solely on someone’s request for physical healing. Jesus knew that healing involved more than just the physical realm and he did not want to lead his followers astray by unending requests for sensational physical healings that would only hinder their understanding of his whole message.

Several years ago, a wise and wonderful 63 year-old woman named Ethel taught me much about sickness, healing and faith. I visited Ethel for many months in her comfortable home in Littlefield before she died of colon cancer in May of 1996. Although it has been many years, I share her insights and understandings with others on the

edge of life who do not understand why God has not “healed” them. One day when Ethel was in the hospital to get her pain under better control, her pastor was just ending his prayer and saying his good-byes as I entered her room. We greeted each other and the door had not completely closed when she giggled and said, “That poor man can’t deal with my dying!” I said, “Ethel, what do you mean that your minister can’t deal with your dying?” And she proceeded to teach me. “Well every time he prays with me, he prays for the miracle of physical healing and I want to say to him, ‘Don’t you think God knows by now that I am open to that?!’ What my dear pastor doesn’t understand is that my death will most likely be my healing. God has already given me great peace and while I would of course like to live a longer life, I have had a good life and I have much gratitude for all that I have experienced and it really will be okay when I have to go.” Ethel, like Jesus, truly understood that healing apart from relationship and physical wholeness apart from spiritual wholeness is only half the loaf.

In an act of compassion and love, Jesus healed the man with leprosy and in so doing, honored his search for wholeness. While God does not always respond to our requests for physical healings or magical interventions in this same way, Ethel and many other brave people of great faith have taught me that God always honors our search for

healing by opening us up to love no matter what our predicament and by removing barriers in our lives that isolate and alienate us from one another, our deepest selves and our loving God.

“And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.”

Sometimes tragic circumstances and dreaded diseases isolate us from our families, friends and communities. At other times, for a whole host of reasons that often don't even make sense, we isolate and quarantine ourselves. Whether we are shut out or whether we are shutting others out, we pray on this day for the ability to accept the One who uses flesh and blood like us to cross the barriers and empty spaces of our lives and touch us with life and hope at this time. May we feel empowered to take the hand of the One who seeks to bring healing to our weary lives and tattered souls and may we realize that our acts of kindness and compassion to others have the power to heal our world!

PASTORAL PRAYER

We gather on this warm Spring Sunday with friends, family and acquaintances hoping to catch a warmth for our spirit and a greater connection to you, O God, to our inmost selves, and to those significant people in our lives who mean the most to us. We are humbled and blessed when we look back across our days and see how the problems, tragedies and sorrows of our lives are mixed in with the unspeakable joys, accomplishments and wonders of our unique experience of being alive. We give thanks for the gift of life we have and for the love and grace that has sustained, nurtured and upheld us all along. Sometimes we are aware of You, O God, working your healing and magic in our lives. But if we are to be honest, more often than not, we are totally unaware of your presence and can only hope you are there and hard at work. From our experience we know it is usually in hindsight when we look back over the events that have defined and shaped who we are now, that

we are able to see the mysterious ways you worked to bring healing, wholeness and greater life to our little corner of the world.

On this day as we hear about a man with leprosy who Jesus touched and made clean, we are reminded of the times when we have been the lonely, the isolated, the unloved, the unwanted, the marginalized one, times when we have been quarantined and cut off from our communities for whatever reason, worried, afraid, anxious, guilty, or sick in body, mind and soul. Help us O God to be open to your touch and your presence in small ways when we are unable to comprehend the big picture and our place in it. Enable us to embrace the grace, wholeness and healing that touches us in magical and life-affirming ways and puts us back on our feet again.

Be with all of our loved ones who are sick in body, mind, and heart. Help us to know how best to support and love them through their hurts and difficulties and enable them to know their great value and worth even when they are not able to work for their keep or give anything tangible back. May your amazing grace continue to pursue us all and may we reach out to you and be open to the joy of the journey as we follow you and receive astonishing new life by getting good at giving life away. In Jesus name we pray together, Our Father...AMEN

When William Sloan Coffin Jr. was the chaplain at Yale, his college-age son, Alex, died in a car accident. Alex and his friends had been drinking and on the way home, Alex missed a turn, crashed through a barrier, and plunged into the icy waters of a river north of Manhattan. After the memorial service, a woman, wanting to be helpful, approached Coffin and said something about what happened to his son being the will of God. The eloquent Coffin wrote later, “I wanted to grab her by the throat and shout, “Lady, that’s blatantly wrong! God didn’t cause the accident and it wasn’t God’s will that my son died. None of us knows enough about God to ever say that. God doesn’t go around the world hurting and killing people. When the water closed in over my son’s car, I believe the heart of God was the first of all our hearts to break.”

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