

Congregational United Church of Christ
Sunday, February 5, 2012
"Healing Presence" (Mark 1:40-45)
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In Mark's Gospel Jesus does a lot of preaching and teaching, though interestingly Mark often merely says Jesus taught in some place and then moved on, without giving us anything of that teaching's content. Mark is also filled with stories of Jesus healing. Mark's first chapter is typical.

After calling his fisherman disciples from their boats and nets, Mark says:

"Then they entered Capernaum. When the Sabbath arrived, Jesus lost no time in getting to the meeting place (the local synagogue). He spent the day there teaching.... "

Then in the course of next few verses, Jesus is confronted by (in order): first, a disturbed, mentally ill man who broke up the prayer meeting in the synagogue; second, upon going to Simon Peter's house after the synagogue service, Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law; third, that same night villagers bring their sick and evil-afflicted people to him

to be healed, forming a line that stretched a long way from the door of Peter's house; fourth, as he traveled preaching through Galilee, he was throwing out the demons; and finally the chapter ends with today's story about Jesus healing a leper.

That's a whole lot of healing from someone who said to Peter, "I have come to preach...that is why I came."

We have always liked the idea of Jesus as a healer. Yet strangely it is a ministry which many of us mainline Protestants have shunned like the plague, if I may mix a metaphor.

Perhaps we have seen too many TV charlatans like Oral Roberts or Benny Hinn to take healing very seriously as a legitimate ministry for us church folks. Or maybe our reluctance is tied to our apparent failure to pray our way out of sickness or disease, either for ourselves or for others.

Whatever it is that keeps us from engaging in healing ministry in the life of our church, it is sad. It is sad because the Scriptures strongly affirm ministries of spiritual healing. You see, the root of the word HEALING in New Testament Greek, is SOZO. And this same Greek word is also the root for the words SALVATION and WHOLENESS.

Spiritual healing is God's work of offering persons balance, harmony, and wholeness of body, mind, spirit, and relationships through confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Though such healing, God works to bring about reconciliation between God and humanity, among individuals and communities, within each person, and between humanity and the rest of the creation.

The New Testament, as in our Markan examples, records that Jesus himself healed the estranged and sick and sent out his disciples on ministries of healing. In the Letter of James we hear this call to pray for and anoint the sick, that they may be healed:

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, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

All healing is of God. The Church's healing ministry in no way detracts from the gifts God gives through medicine and psychotherapy. Neither is the church's healing ministry a substitute for either medicine or the proper care of one's health. That said, I also agree with Norman Cousins who wrote:

"It is reasonable to expect the doctor to recognize that science may not have all the answers to problems of health and healing."

The church's healing ministry, if it practices it, adds to our total resources for wholeness. Healing, in the Christian sense, is the reintegration of the body, mind, emotions, and spirit which allows us, in community, to live life fully.

Healing is not magic. Rather underlying it is the great mystery of

God's love. Those who minister spiritual healing are channels of God's love. Although no one can predict what will happen in a given instance, many marvelous healings have taken place.

What I do know is that God does not promise that we shall be spared suffering. But God does most surely promise to be with us in our suffering, just as God did not spare his Son but was with him in the agony of the crucifixion. When we trust that promise that God is with us in our suffering, we are enabled to recognize God's sustaining presence in pain, sickness, injury, and estrangement.

Likewise, God does not promise that we will be cured of all illnesses; and we all must face the inevitability of death. When we hold a service of healing like we do today, this is not a service of curing. Healing ministry provides an atmosphere in which healing can happen. And the greatest healing of all is the reunion or reconciliation of a human being with God. When this happens, physical healing sometimes occurs, mental and emotional balance is often restored, spiritual health is enhanced, and relationships are healed. For the Christian the basic

purpose of spiritual healing is to renew and strengthen one's relationship with the living Christ.

What a healing service may look like is varied depending on both the traditions of the church and the needs of the moment. But a healing service always seems to involve four themes intertwined: God's word, growth in faith, forgiveness of sin, and human touch. God's word, of course, reassures us of the Creator's love and compassion, to which Jesus' healing ministry testifies. Growth in faith in God's unmerited goodness brings to a place of healing. Forgiveness of sin reveals the connection between forgiveness and healing, which affirms the psychosomatic unity in us which modern health science affirms. Touch in healing embodies the embrace of God for the redeemed creation when in the mystery of last things God will make all things new. As such a healing service contains, of course, prayers for healing, often accompanied by anointing with oil and the laying on of hands.

Laying on of hands, with or without anointing oil, or even just the holding of another's hand all show the power of touch, which plays a central role in the healing recorded

in the New Testament. Jesus often touched others – blessing children, washing feet, healing injuries or disease, and raising people from death. Biblical precedent combines with our natural desire to reach out to persons in need in prompting us to touch gently and lovingly those who ask for healing prayers. Such an act is a tangible expression of the presence of the healing Christ, working in and through those who minister in Christ’s name.

This morning we will not employ anointing with oil though its symbolism is deep and rich. For folks who have run gun-shy of healing as most of us Protestants have done for years, oil on the forehead may be too much.

But I invite you now to enter into this time of healing prayer as you are able and comfortable. May all who seek God’s healing open their hearts to the Spirit of the Lord.

I read a story this week of a little boy and his father. They were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. The boy looked at the stone and thought about it a little. Then he asked his father, “Do you think if I use all my strength, I can move that rock?”

The father thought for a moment and said, “I think that if you use all your strength, you can do it.”

That was all the little boy needed. He ran over to the rock and began to push on it. He pushed and he pushed, so hard did he try that little beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. But the rock didn’t move – not an inch, not half an inch.

After a while, the little boy sat on the ground. His face was fallen. His whole body seemed to be just a lump there on the earth. “You were wrong,” he told his dad. “I can’t do it.”

His father walked over to him, knelt beside him, and put his arm around the boy’s shoulder. “You can do it,” he said. “You just didn’t use all your strength. You didn’t ask me to help.”

Healing is all about using all our strength, as in loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. We’re called to serve and heal and make whole, to restore and rebuild and reach out.

You can’t hear a story like this one about the little boy and the stone in the road or the one we heard this

morning about a leper cured without bubbling over.

I was haunted this week by the John Bell hymn we sang last Sunday called "The Summons," and then a Thursday's UCC Clergy Cluster 1 meeting in Evanston, our host had us sing that same hymn. The verse which got to me all week was this one God sings to us:

Will you let the blinded see
if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free
and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean,
and do such as this unseen,
And admit to what I mean
in your and you in me?

We need one another, a community of faith, in which we can better learn who Jesus is, and what that means in our lives, what it means to follow Jesus faithfully, serving, healing, and making whole, restoring, rebuilding, and reaching out. I quote one of my favorite writers, Wendell Berry, has written: "To be healed we must come with all the other creatures to the feast of Creation."

The powers of disease, suffering and possession are cracking, and the news is just too good for human

breasts to keep inside. We will at last be made whole. And we shall live. It's time for a Hallelujah on the way to the temple!

Pray with me please:

Guide me, O my great Redeemer,
pilgrim through this barren land; I
am weak, but you are mighty; hold
me with your powerful hand.

Open now the crystal fountain,
where the healing waters flow. Let
the fire and cloudy pillar lead me all
my journey through. O Bread of
Heaven, O Strong Deliverer, ever be
my strength and shield and we will
ever sing your praise. Amen.