

"The Church as a Healing Center in the Age of Pandemic"

Acts 3:1-10

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

May 3, 2020

In the shadow of the Cold War, C. S. Lewis was asked to address how humanity should live in an atomic age. The atomic bomb, Lewis writes, served to “forcibly remind us of the sort of world we are living in, and which, during the prosperous period before 1914, we were beginning to forget.” The imminent threat of extinction has woken us “from a petty dream,” he went on, “and now we can begin to talk about realities.” As Samuel Johnson once said, “The threat of death wonderfully concentrates the mind,” so COVID-19, the technical term for the coronavirus, is doing just that- waking us up to realities we have paid insufficient attention to. This crisis is forcing many churches to rethink who they are and what they should be about, and one of the most glaring realizations is that amidst our need to “socially separate,” we are rediscovering how the center of the church’s life is not the worship service or the Sunday gathering but Jesus Christ himself. Wherever we are and regardless of the conditions we happen to find ourselves in, he is with us and we are all united by the same spirit- HIS spirit, the HOLY SPIRIT. Hence, in spite of our distance from one another, each one of us still represents Christ’s Church, and by virtue of our baptism, each of us is equipped with the same power and entrusted with the same responsibilities as when the church worships together as one.

This leads me to a second conclusion. In light of this health-care crisis that has spread throughout the world, it is significant that many churches are experiencing a renewed awareness in health care as a mission. Increasingly, churches are perceiving themselves as healing fellowships, wellness centers, and caring communities for the wounded, the disabled, the afflicted, and the dying. The compassionate and healing ministry of Jesus Christ as witnessed to in the Gospels has become a prime motivation again as we move further into the twenty-first century. I say “again” because up until the last few centuries, the responsibility for much of the sick and dying fell upon the Church and not professional medical workers or funeral home operators. We forget that it was the Church who organized the very first hospitals and operated them up to and through the time of the Middle Ages.

Take, for example, the way Christians tried to help afflicted fellow Christians and pagans alike during the mid-third century plague. Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, described his flock’s activities as “visiting the sick without a thought as to the danger, assiduously ministering to them, tending them in Christ.” But as society became more and more secularized, the Church as primary care-givers eventually gave way to the rise of professional doctors and nurses along with their specialties in certain types of medicine. Seventy-five years after Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that “Christ comes near to us in the sick,” churches are returning to their roots of care for the sick and afflicted. We serve as reminders that all persons are created in the image of God and thus each of us deserves the same measure of respect and quality of care as anyone else in this world, and that as members of Christ’s body, each of us has the mandate to bear each other’s burdens, and that means physically as well as spiritually.

In our lesson this morning, we are told that Peter and John are on their way to the Temple

for prayer when beside the entrance way--a gate called Beautiful--they pass a man who has been lame from birth begging for alms. Because of his disability, “depending upon the kindness of strangers” as Blanche DuBois so famously says in “A Streetcar Named Desire” is the only way he can survive. Interestingly enough, Peter doesn’t ignore the man as you or I might have done. Instead, he asks him to look directly at him, to give him his full attention for he is about to do something far GREATER than handing him enough money to buy that next bottle of wine with in the hope of forgetting his situation. In other words, he doesn’t regard him as some sort of human scavenger looking for a free hand-out, he doesn’t think of him as a parasite upon society, but rather he sees him as a WHOLE person, as a man deserving both love and respect. He tells him, “Silver and gold have I none but what I DO have I give you- in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth I say get up and walk!” Then, taking him by the hand, he raises him up and suddenly the man learns that his feet and ankles are strong enough to support his weight. HE CAN STAND!- something he hadn’t been able to do since the day he was born. In his joy, he discovers he can not only STAND but he can WALK and he can RUN and he can even JUMP as well, as though he had never been disabled, as though he was made COMPLETELY NEW again. Immediately, he begins to praise God for what he knows is nothing short of a miracle. Entering the Temple with them, he is recognized by the worshipers there as “that beggar,” as that pathetic old man who day after day sat beside the Beautiful Gate pleading for alms and they are filled with wonder and amazement.

Now there are a number of healings found throughout the New Testament. We read again and again of Jesus making the lame walk and the blind to see, delivering persons from demon possession, curing persons of leprosy--the most dreaded disease in the ancient world--and MOST dramatically, bringing the dead back to life among many others. In each instance, Jesus had either performed the healing himself or he was WITH the disciples when they did it. What makes THIS account so special is that this is the very first time that Jesus is NOT with them in person, but rather he is present TO them through his Spirit which they had received at Pentecost.

Here, Peter and John represent the Church going out into the world, not only preaching and teaching the “Good News” of Jesus Christ, but actively bringing healing to persons in the authority Christ had given them. This is Luke, the author of Acts, showing the Early Church that healing is part of the Great Commission, and that is it one the Church must actively be involved in if persons are going to experience the FULLNESS of Christ’s saving power. It is showing us that TRUE salvation must go beyond merely the SPIRITUAL but to our own EMOTIONAL and PHYSICAL well-being AS WELL, and that it is the Church’s task to help people see this as an essential part of God’s kingdom as well as an integral part of Christ’s message.

The fact is that the various dimensions of our lives—the intellectual, the emotional, the moral, the spiritual, and the physical--all go hand-in-hand so that when one aspect is affected or suffers, then the others are affected as well. Psychologists say it is an unquestionable fact that mental health and physical health are intricately intertwined, that when the mind suffers, so too does the body and vice versa. The same can be said of the relationship between our mental health and spiritual health. Whatever hurts or heals one’s relationship with oneself and others will tend to hurt or heal one’s relationship with God while a healthy mind is necessary for a person to get the most out of his or her religious faith.

Part of the reason mainline churches like our own have been so reluctant to embrace healing is that as Presbyterians, we tend to be a highly rational group and distrustful of things we cannot understand. Without empirical evidence to support it, our first impulse is to dismiss it as some form of magic. Another reason has been that our understanding of healing has been largely shaped by the kinds of excesses and theatrics of revivalists like Oral Roberts and Benny Hinn. Such spectacles involving elaborate stage productions with wheel chairs emptying and crutches being tossed aside and people falling down supposedly under the power of the Holy Spirit has smacked more of emotional manipulation than any activity of God. I've been to a number of such crusades over the years so I can attest to this from personal experience.

Rather than shying away or feeling embarrassed about healing, we need to embrace it as a vital part of our ministry. We need to restore it to the same central position that it occupies in the scriptures and that it did in the Early Church. Because ancient Judaism had such a limited conception of the afterlife, it tended to focus on life in the here and now. It was the PRESENT and not after death that rewards and punishments were meted out. Therefore, they looked upon health and wealth as God's rewards for good and faithful behavior, while sickness and misfortune were viewed as God's punishment for sinful disobedience resulting in chronically ill patients being excluded altogether from the Temple and from the community itself. The Greeks had a similar notion, that sickness and even death came from God, but where the Jews connected it to human sin and disobedience, the Greeks viewed it more as a matter of luck or fate.

However, Jesus radically changed all that. In the gospels, his ministry is characterized as one of preaching, teaching, AND HEALING. The Good News was that the kingdom of God was now breaking into the lives of people everywhere. It was a present reality accessible to EVERYONE, and this included more than just spiritual wholeness but PHYSICAL wholeness as well. Nearly one-fifth of the gospels is devoted to Jesus healing persons. Everywhere he went, people's lives were touched on every dimension and it served as evidence of the in-breaking of his kingdom. If Jesus had one mission, it was to bring the power and healing of God's Spirit into the lives of EVERY person and restore them to wholeness on EVERY level. Jesus was ahead of his time in understanding the relationship of the physical to the rest of one's being.

Following our Lord's death and resurrection, that same ministry of preaching and teaching and healing was conferred upon his disciples. His message now became THEIR message. He sent them out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment." Jesus told them that they would perform the same works he did and even MORE as he had to ascend to the Father. Thus, their ministry was characterized by many signs and wonders and mighty works which showed that they were continuing in his mission and that his kingdom was continuing to break into their midst.

After receiving the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the early church CONTINUED to experience his presence for it was none other than the personal power of CHRIST HIMSELF. As a result, there grew from out of it an uncommon fellowship of love and caring which would eventually go on to change the world. This experience of the risen Christ in their midst was

regularly celebrated through their worship and re-enacted in the sacraments, specifically the Lord's Supper. With the Spirit's help, it became MORE than just a rite but an EXPERIENCE in which people could be touched and transformed, and even physically healed.

In the epistle of James, the elders are instructed to anoint the sick with oil and then pray the prayer of faith. The gift of healing is thus no longer the special province of a special person such as "apostles" or "seminary-trained ministers" but the gift of a WHOLE CLASS of Christian officers called "elders" who are called upon to lead his Church. They fervently believed that their God was a HEALING God who expected a healing ministry from his followers.

This brief history has been my way of underscoring how the Church as the Body of Christ has always BEEN and will always BE a "healing center" with Jesus Christ, the GREAT HEALER, at its core. As the Church, as members of Christ's body, we have been commissioned to continue Christ's ministry in the world, to mirror his words and work in everything THEY did. Two thousand years later, that mission continues to go forth. When you think of Mother Teresa fighting on the side of the sick and dying in Calcutta, India, or William Wilberforce in nineteenth-century England helping to overturn the slave trade in that country, or Martin Luther King, Jr. attacking racism here in America, you see examples of persons mirroring the same commitment to health and wholeness that Christ himself had. We are a community of faith who needs to recover a WHOLISTIC vision of the person while exercising a WHOLISTIC practice, one that ministers on many levels at once- on the social and economic as well as the individual; on the physical as well as the emotional and the spiritual. In this way, we testify to the life-giving, spirit-transforming activity of God in BOTH our lives and in the world.

But I have one other point to make before closing and that is the distinction that must be made between one being "cured" and one being "healed." A person is "cured" of his or her malady or disease when it has been treated and its effects are no longer present. One of the most dramatic stories of Jesus involved his healing of the ten lepers. All ten were "cured" in the sense that the disease was no longer present in their bodies; they were no longer afflicted by what was considered the most dreaded disease in the ancient world. However, only ONE of them--a SAMARITAN by birth--had enough presence of mind to stop, turn around, and throw himself down before Jesus, praising God for what he had just received. More than cured, the Samaritan leper was HEALED in contrast to the other nine who though outwardly cured, remained UNHEALED. You see, there was still something INWARD, something IN them they had NOT been delivered from- a disease called "ingratitude," and what this tells us is that far more than healing being just a PHYSICAL cure, REAL healing must involve the WHOLE person, one's ENTIRE being. Healing is any sign of God's kingdom in a person's life and not necessarily an answer to every medical or physical need. Thus REAL health involves being at peace with God and at peace with oneself REGARDLESS of the presence of sickness or disease still in our bodies.

Some years ago, Malcolm Muggeridge--an English journalist, author, and Christian of note--visited Lourdes, France to make a film for BBC television about the thousands of persons who stream there every day in search of a miracle healing. He confessed that he expected the trip to be nothing less than depressing. Instead, what he saw was one of the most transcendent experiences of his life. He said:

*Actually, from the moment I got on the train at Victoria (we travelled to Lourdes with a party of pilgrims so as to be able to film en route), I had an extraordinary feeling of light-heartedness. I don't think I have ever in my life been in so cheerful a company as this collection of the sick and the crippled, many of them soon to die, and those who were looking after them...*

*These people—the fortitude with which they endured their afflictions, the joy with which life none the less filled them, their compassion for those more stricken than themselves, above all their serene confrontation of the prospect of death in the certain knowledge of God's love and mercy—occupied my mind and spirit much more than Lourdes as a place.*

*Places, as it happens, have never interested me much, as such, and Holy Places, whether Bethlehem or Lourdes, tend to be marred for me by the sellers of tawdry relics, the bric-a-brac of piety, who gather around them. However, in the grotto where St Bernadette is supposed to have had her vision—the very heart of Lourdes—I found a marvelous stillness; not due, let me hasten to say, to an absence of people...For most of the time, in all seasons, it is teeming with people. No, the stillness is within, not without; wonderfully peaceful and uplifting.*

Muggeridge said that while he saw no “cures” that day or during the rest of his time there, he DID see thousands of “healings,” almost as many as there were pilgrims.

Now one of my prime responsibilities as pastor is to visit those who are ill or suffering—whether in mind or body or in spirit; whether at home, at the nursing home, or in the hospital—and to serve as a conduit or channel of God's love to them. By striving to be a caring presence and offering prayers on their behalf, they are reminded that they are never alone, that God and his people stand WITH them and FOR them, supporting them through their trials. This is a huge part of the healing process and though they might not always be CURED of their condition (although a large percentage eventually are) I find that many more are HEALED- HEALED inwardly, HEALED in their hearts and in their minds and in their spirits. I've come to believe that more important than being CURED of whatever sickness or pain ails us is to be HEALED-HEALED of the sin in our lives, HEALED of such destructive attitudes as hatred and anger and fear, of jealousy and selfishness and pride. It is to discover how the forgiveness we find through Christ restores us to relationship with God, with one another, and with the whole of creation, and that when we understand this, then we can better handle whatever problems or afflictions may come our way.

However, I'm not the ONLY one called to a ministry of healing. Whosoever would call him or herself a Christian, a child of God, is ALSO called to such service. Whether you are an elder in the church or not, whether you think of yourself worthy enough or not, by virtue of your baptism, you TOO are required to serve as an agent of his healing to somebody else in need. ANYONE may be used of God to effectuate healing in others and this means that each of US must be willing to stand beside those who hurt, lay hands upon them, and pray for wholeness in their lives. Unfortunately, because we have professionalized ministry so, we expect the PASTOR to fulfill this function when it is really the responsibility of EVERY member of his Body. The fact is that you are ALL ministers of his Church every bit as I am and we are never stronger in our faith and never more unified in our mission than when each of us regards such service to one another to be our HIGHEST calling, our most SACRED responsibility. Let us pray...

*We confess to you, O Lord, that our lives are broken and acknowledge that our world is in need of your healing. Send the power of your Holy Spirit into our lives and help redeem our world through the presence of Jesus Christ as he continues to live in us and work through us. In his name we pray. Amen.*