

Sermon, July 18, 2021

Proper 11B, St. Mark's Episcopal Church, ABQ

Sylvia Miller-Mutia

Link to scriptures:

https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp11_RCL.html

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking; Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask; through the worthiness of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*

Ephesians 2

... But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So, he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; **for through him both of us have access** in one Spirit to the Father. So, then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Mark 6

...When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (p368)

“In the contemporary world, we view disease as a malfunction...We focus on a sick person’s ability to function, to do....in the ancient Mediterranean, one’s state of being was more important than one’s ability to act or function...the healers of the ancient world thus focused on restoring a person to a valued state of being, rather than the ability to function.... Anthropologists carefully distinguish between disease and

illness. Illness is not so much a biomedical matter as a social one.... illnesses cut people off from the group.” (Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, p. 368)

Introducing Kendra

One of the beautiful and unexpected things about this past year and ½ is how much our worshipping community has grown through our online worship. We’ve welcomed dozens of new members into our fellowship-many of whom are here in the pews with us today, and many of whom continue to join us to worship online from their homes near and far. One of our new members is Kendra Koch, who lives and works in Austin, TX, but has been worshipping online with St. Mark’s on an almost daily basis for the past year and a half. With the support and guidance of the clergy and a team of dedicated lay leaders from St. Mark’s, Kendra is in the process of discerning a call to the priesthood. One particular gift that Kendra brings to ministry in the church is her extensive personal and professional experience working with families of medically fragile children and people with disabilities. As part of Kendra’s process of discernment and formation over the next several months, she will be helping lead St. Mark’s in a process of deep listening to the unique voices and experience of people with disabilities in our community-both at St. Mark’s and in the surrounding community. These conversations raise all sorts of important questions about health and healing, about inclusion and community. And so, it seems providential that our Gospel lesson for today raises many of these same questions for all of us to consider this morning.

Introducing a Biblical concept of Healing

In today’s Gospel Mark tells us that (after Jesus has sent his disciples out 2 by 2 on mission of preaching and healing, and they have returned, and Jesus has perplexed the disciples by feeding the 5,000 and Walking on Water):

...They came to land at Gennesaret and moored their boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

I think we sometimes forget how utterly central Healing was to the life and ministry of Jesus. We remember the teaching. We remember the feeding. We remember the dying. We remember the rising. But somehow, we manage to overlook the healing. So much healing. And when we DO remember the healing, we often fail to understand what Healing really means.

One biblical scholar explains it this way:

“In the contemporary world, we view disease as a malfunction...We focus on a sick person’s ability to function, to *do*....

in the ancient Mediterranean [that is, the world of Jesus], one’s *state of being* was more important than one’s ability to act or function...

the healers of the ancient world thus focused on restoring a person to a *valued state of being, rather than the ability to function....*”

He goes on to write, **“Anthropologists carefully distinguish between disease and illness. Illness is not so much a biomedical matter as a social one.... illnesses cut people off from the group.”** (Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, p. 368)

In other words--in the ancient world--in the biblical world-- sickness isn’t so much about being “broken” -as it is about being cut off and excluded. And healing isn’t so much about “fixing” as it is about inclusion and belonging.

Our post-industrial, market capitalist, air brushed, profit driven, fast paced, image conscious, secular society teaches us to view human worth in utilitarian, rather than relational terms. This “utilitarian” view of human worth, in turn, leads us to view “healing” primarily in terms of functionality, profitability, convenience, and conformity...

Jesus on the other hand, teaches us to view human worth--and by extension healing-- in relational, rather than utilitarian terms. Healing, according to the Gospels, is primarily about the restoration of right relationships--honest, authentic, life-giving relationships-- between the individual, the community, and God. Healing, according to the Gospels, is fundamentally about reconciliation and relationship. Healing, according to the Gospels is, above all else, about restoring and embracing the true, God- given “state of being” of each person---as a beloved, cherished, child of God, “fearfully and wonderfully made” to radiantly reflect the image of God, lovingly created with the capacity to fully love and to be fully loved.

Today’s Gospel

The healing miracle in today’s reading from Mark’s Gospel begins to unfold as soon as the residents of Genneseret catch wind of Jesus’ arrival, and they begin rushing around “bringing the sick on mats” to wherever they hear that Jesus might be. The healing miracle begins as soon as the more able-bodied members of the community choose to leverage their own power to help move less able-bodied people from the margins of their community into its center. The healing miracle begins as soon as the useful, busy citizens of Genneseret stop fishing or farming or whatever other important, profitable work they’re engaged in, in order to pick up their weaker neighbors, and carry them from the backrooms and basements, the attics and alleyways into the marketplace--

right to the center of town. The healing miracle begins to unfold as the powerful and the ordinary members of the community begin to make decisions that enable people on the margins to begin to move into the center; people who are invisible to become more visible; people who are considered untouchable to be touched with loving care-- and people who are considered "unclean" to reach out and touch the fringe of the garment of Jesus, the Holy One, for themselves.

Healing and Salvation

Whether or not we admit it, I deeply believe that we all long for healing.

We long for the healing of our own physical bodies, and the bodies of those we love

We long for the healing of our own hearts, and minds, and relationships...and the hearts, and minds, and relationships of those we love.

We long for the healing of the earth.

We long for the healing of our society--our church, our neighborhood, our city, our nation.

We long for the healing of our communities--healing from the disabling wounds of racism, and sexism, and ageism and ableism, and misunderstanding and judgement and alienation and every other form of diabolical oppression that distorts God's dream and degrades God's children.

The Good News is, Scripture reveals that we worship a God of Healing.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, one of the names by which God is called is Yahweh Rofekha -
-The Lord who Heals.

In the New Testament, we learn that the God of Healing has come to dwell among us in flesh and blood, in the person of Jesus--whose name in Greek means "God Saves", and also "God Heals".

[It's important to note that the Greek word used for "Salvation" in the New Testament is also the word for healing. We can still find traces of this integral connection between salvation and healing in English today. Like, you know how you put a healing salve on a wound---of lavender, or arnica or whatever--it's the same root--salve, salvation. Healing.]

The Good News is that we worship a God of healing. The challenge is that, in order to see God's healing power revealed, in order to experience God's healing power at work within us, in order to participate in God's healing power at work among us, we might need to adjust our perspective. We might need to learn to see healing differently. And we might need to learn to see illness and disability differently, too.

PERSPECTIVE SHIFT

One faithful Christian who has helped me begin shifting my perspective is Claire Porter, a middle school teacher and mother of two young children and friend and former member of St. Mark's. Claire has helped me begin to understand that when a young man of color is the victim of police brutality, it is not because he's black--it is because of white supremacy. His black body is not the problem---a social structure disordered by the myth of white supremacy is the problem. THAT is the sickness that needs healing.

This insight is analogous to the insight of

Another faithful Christian who has helped me begin shifting my perspective is Nancy Eiesland, a woman with a lifelong physical disability, and theologian and author of a book entitled "The Disabled God". Eiesland has helped me begin to understand that when a young woman can't come to the altar rail, it's not because of her wheelchair--it's because of the stairs. Her differently-abled body is not the problem--the limitations of architecture and imagination of the church is the problem. THAT is the wound that needs healing.

EPISTLE

At the heart of our longing for healing is our deepest longing for access, connection, and belonging. Our deepest longing for reconciliation and unity and peace. This longing is so deep and profound that it can sometimes feel painful, but when we are courageous enough to plunge into the heart of our deepest longing, we find the heart of Jesus.

In today's epistle, Paul writes:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ... For he is our peace...he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So, then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.

By the blood of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, every barrier to God's healing power and presence has been overcome. In the Reign of God that Jesus has inaugurated among us, everyone has access. Everyone belongs. You have access. You belong.

Conclusion

Just as the citizens of Gennesaret roll up their sleeves in today's Gospel to carry their ailing siblings, and grandparents, and children and neighbors to the center of town, to the presence of Jesus, so that they might reach out their hands and be healed,

So too Jesus, the Crucified and Risen Christ, rolls up his sleeves to carry each one of us--and all of us together--into the presence of the Living God, so that we too might reach out our hands and be healed.

In Jesus, God has extended the gift of healing--of peace, and unity, and access to God--freely and finally and fully to ALL.... but we still have to say "yes". We still have to choose it. We still have to choose to reach out in love and carry each other. And we still have to choose to accept our own weakness, and to let ourselves be carried, as well.

The choice for healing is always before us. So, I wonder, "how will *you* say 'yes' to healing, today?"

Whom will you carry? And where will you admit your weakness and let others to carry you?

How will you allow yourself to be restored? How will you enable your family and church and community and world to be restored? How will you work to restore and embrace and affirm the true "state of being" of each and every person you encounter--here in our Church and out in our World--as a beloved, cherished, child of God, "fearfully and wonderfully made", radiantly reflecting the image of God, able to love fully and to be fully loved?

How will you say "yes" to co-creating a community with God, here at St. Mark's, where each one of us here today, and each one who is yet to come, can find true healing through the invitation and opportunity to love fully and be fully loved?