

HOW (NOT) TO HEAL BROKENNESS

On being the healing community of Jesus in the world

Luke 9:1-6; Acts 3:1-16

So I wonder if anyone thought it was a bit curious
that in a series of sermons on the public life of the church,
I chose to end with a sermon on healing.

What does healing have to do
with being the church before a watching world?
The ministry of healing is usually private.
A pastor or elder prays at someone's bedside.
Or an intimate gathering of friends and family
prays, touches, anoints.
Even in public worship,
healing prayers are quiet, personal, and private.
Our healing ministry is *not* something
we are ready to take to the streets, is it?
Or is it?

We are a nation and culture built around
individual and private consumers.
And I think we've come to look at God, and faith,
and healing, through the same lens.
What has God done for me lately?

There's a huge interest these days in the relationship between
spirituality and good health.
Research shows that people who pray when they're sick
get better quicker.
So we are urged to be more spiritual, to pray more,
so that we will be more healthy.

But what does this say about *God*?
What happens when we make individual health and well-being
the highest good, the end toward which we strive,
and we make God and faith the means to achieve that end?
Haven't we just made health to be the *real* god,
and reduced the God of the universe
to little more than an instrument to achieve our ends?

But this instrumental way of looking at God, faith, and healing
is wildly popular in our culture.

It spawned a whole industry of spiritual products,
from angels on the dashboard, to Jesus figurines,
to specially-blessed prayer oils.

It created the phenomenon of independent celebrity healers,
who are not accountable to the local church,
whose ministry is focused entirely
on healing individuals of various physical ailments,
and who preach a shallow theology.
They pay scant attention to daily discipleship,
or following Jesus in the ordinary,
or the central role that Jesus' body, the church,
plays in our health and spiritual growth,
or to the rich and multi-layered theology of suffering
that is part of Christian faith.

To popular culture, pain and suffering is an unmitigated evil,
and death is to be avoided at all costs.

We're not much interested in a God who, in Jesus,
became our *companion* in suffering,
became a suffering God.

Yes, God is all about healing.
You can't read far in any of the four gospels
before you encounter a story of Jesus healing.
In Jesus, God showed his compassion
on those who were sick, blind, or lame,
on those oppressed by spiritual beings . . .
even on those already dead.
So, it's not a question of whether
God has the capacity and desire to heal individuals.
Of course, God does.

No, it's a question of context.
The healings in the gospels
were part of something much larger God was up to.
Healing was not the *end*, but the *means*.
Jesus did *not* come just to heal people.
He came to proclaim and make known the kingdom of God.

And healing was one of the main signs of that kingdom.

My criticism is *not* that we pray over individuals for their healing.

No, we *ought* to pray for the healing of persons.

And we do, and we always will.

My problem with celebrity healers is not that they pray in faith for healing.

My problem is what they leave *out* of the message.

Both the culture and the church

too often makes individual healing an end to itself,
and ignores its larger context.

God's mission is still the same as it was in the Gospels,

to establish the kingdom of God on the earth,

and to invite people into kingdom communities

that proclaim and demonstrate

the full and fruitful life God intended for us at Creation.

Healing is an integral part of that mission.

Kingdom communities *are* healing communities.

Look at any healing story in the Gospels.

Jesus did not care for just one narrow slice of their well-being.

He wanted them to live a full and fruitful life

as a member of God's covenant people.

If the purpose of Jesus' ministry was simply to heal

every disease and every disability and every oppression,

then he actually wasn't very efficient.

He wasted a lot of time telling stories,

hanging out with his disciples talking about the kingdom,

eating meals with Pharisees and tax collectors,

going to wedding parties,

retreating into the mountains to pray.

Meanwhile, there were a lot of sick people *not* getting healed.

He could have organized differently,

He could have deputized hundreds of disciples,

and spread them over the whole region,

and set up 24/7 assembly-line touch-and-heal stations.

Even in a short 2-year ministry, he could have gotten to everyone.

Apparently that wasn't the point.

Jesus came to proclaim the kingdom of God,

to explain it, to demonstrate it, to invite people *into* it.

Jesus was just as concerned that lepers

found their way back into the covenant community,

as he was that they got cured of their leprosy.

Read Matthew chapter 8.

When he healed a man of leprosy, he didn't just say "be cured."

First, he broke the law by touching the man,

openly confronting the social and religious system

that isolated lepers from their own people.

Then he told him to go to the priest to be declared clean,

to be fully restored to his covenant community.

And read Luke chapter 8.

After he cured the demon-possessed man

that lived out in the cemetery,

the man begged to go with him and become a traveling disciple.

Jesus said,

"No. Go back to your town. Tell people what happened."

And I don't think Jesus' rationale was just spreading the news.

When a man who used to break chains, and cut himself,

and cry and babble, and live naked among the tombs,

suddenly is sane, clothed, and having normal conversations,

word gets around, without trying.

No, I think Jesus knew the man needed deeper healing.

He wasn't quite finished being healed.

He needed to be restored to his family and community,

to find the wholeness that comes from knowing

who you are, and who you belong to.

You'd be hard-pressed to find *any* healing story in the Gospels

that did not have some deeper restoration going on.

Healing is much more than the absence of disease.

It nearly always means being drawn into a healing community,

finding a full and fruitful life as one of God's people

living out God's kingdom on earth.

Remember today's Gospel reading, from Luke 9?

This story comes right after the healing of the demoniac,

and a couple other healing stories.

In Luke 9, Jesus *does* deputize his disciples.

But not to create a more efficient healing machine.

He gave them authority over diseases and demons,
but then told them to

“proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.”

Their methodology was community-building.

They were to go without any bag, bread, or supplies.

They were to be dependent, *not* self-sufficient,
in order to encourage sharing and building community.

They were to find homes that welcomed them,
that extended peace.

Then they were ready

to share the good news of the kingdom and to heal.

Healing was located within a kingdom community.

And the disciples kept on taking this approach to healing ministry,
even after Jesus returned to heaven.

All through the book of Acts

it’s impossible to separate physical healing
from restoration of relationships
and incorporation into a healing community.

This morning we heard the story of the crippled beggar, Acts chapter 3.

It wasn’t the healing itself that got Peter and John into trouble.

It was the fact that Peter and John
tried to put that healing into a larger context.

They used the opportunity to point out that this healing
was a direct result of the fulfillment of covenant,
begun with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,
and fulfilled in Jesus, who the people had just crucified.

And they used the chance to invite the crowd to repent,
and turn to Jesus,
and become part of the new community of the kingdom
that God was bringing forth.

And about five-thousand of them *did*.

That’s the reason Peter and John
were dragged in front of the high priest and Council.

It’s really not a difficult thing to pray for healing.

All we do is

respect God’s right to heal whomever God will,
realize that it is only God who heals,
and then pray, trusting God.

That’s not the hard part.

The hard part is to take seriously this larger call of God,
to enter fully into the life of a healing community
oriented entirely around the kingdom of God.

That’s where deep healing, deep reconciliation,
and deep restoration can happen.

Healing, divorced from a healing covenant community,
may happen to *some* degree.

But it can never be deep healing,

because we were created by God for life in community.

In God’s eyes, a whole life, a life healed of brokenness,
must be a life restored to community,
restored to the life God made us for.

Today I want to challenge us at Park View Mennonite Church
to explore a deeper life as a healing community.

I’m convinced that if we desire deep healing,
then we need a deep communal life,
a life in a healing community
centered on Christ our healer.

This is true no matter what brokenness.

Whether bodily illness, or estrangement, or grief,
or spiritual bondage, or mental illness,
or social fragmentation.

But this healing community needs to be on a small enough scale
to allow for face-to-face relationships that are deep,
are intentional, and are bound by mutual covenant.

We simply cannot expect that all the healing we need
will happen in the privacy of our prayer closet,
or in the anonymity of a worship service with 300 people.

We must do what Jesus expected his followers to do,
build intimate communities that embody the kingdom
in our broken lives and broken neighborhoods.

So when one among us struggles with intense
and persistent grief,
they will never carry that burden alone.
And when someone faces a debilitating illness,
they can expect more than a perfunctory prayer from the pulpit.
They will have persons who come to their aid
to help with chores without being asked,
and who gather around them in concerted prayer for healing.
When someone suffers from domestic violence,
or some injury too painful to name publicly,
they will have persons—a few, but enough—
who will hold their story safely
without judging or abandoning,
who will carry them in prayer,
when they cannot pray for themselves.
And when a marriage, or other significant relationship is broken,
there will be persons who can both support,
and challenge with integrity,
and with an honest and authentic love.

You know, healing communities are not just a vehicle to
support and affirm and provide emotional comfort.
They are not just spiritual-psychological support groups.
Healing communities challenge each other toward wholeness.
They are communities committed to embody
the values and character of God's kingdom.
So whether the brokenness is physical, emotional, or spiritual . . .
whether it is personal or relational or systemic . . .
a healing community oriented around the kingdom of God
is best equipped to minister the healing power of God.

That includes being the healing representatives of Christ
in the culture and world around us.
That is why I say healing is central to what it means
to be the church in public.

Perhaps today, more than ever,
our culture needs healing communities of the kingdom.
We have just come through an election
that has revealed more than ever the brokenness in our society.

This country has always had disagreement
over different political visions.
But election years, and maybe this one more than most,
reveal deeper wounds.
In the run up to election,
political differences take the form of personal character attacks.
They pit families and neighbors against each other.
They arouse intense emotions of fear, bitterness,
anger, or betrayal.
Political differences take on deep religious significance,
and even divide congregations.
They cause otherwise kind, considerate people
to engage in derogatory labeling, stereotyping, and slander.

But now it's over, *sort of*.
The elections have been decided.
But deep social wounds remain.
What would it look like for Park View Mennonite Church
to be a Christ-centered healing community
in post-election Harrisonburg?

Stanley Hauerwas once said that when it comes to public life,
the best thing a church can do, is be the church.
That means we put our loyalty to the kingdom of God first.
It means that we embody, in our common life,
a centeredness and clarity of life,
that allows us to thrive as a Christian community,
not in *spite* of, but *because* of, our political differences.
It means that we would be willing to seek out deep conversations—
not happen to have, but seek out—
deep conversations between persons
with very different political philosophies.
Democrat and Republican sisters and brothers in Christ
gathering together to discern how best
to contribute our gifts to public society.

And out of those conversations come relationships
of such deep mutual respect and love
that it will capture the attention of a watching world.
I can't help but think that the world is watching the church

even closer now.

There was a lot of religious talk (or shouting)
going on in this election.

So now, how are churches going to live out their values.
The world is watching.

Wouldn't it be great if followers of Jesus everywhere
could show the world a different way to live together
as a community of healing in a time of social brokenness?
In a community that exudes kindness and Christian civility,
a community whose members never join in when
talk at the water cooler gets ugly, or labels or demeans,
a community that is able to speak respectfully to,
and about, people we disagree with,
a community that is amazingly generous
even in times of economic crisis,
a community that reaches out to the marginalized
and forgotten people of our society,
regardless how many or how few public funds
are available for social programs,
a community that is willing to sacrifice its own agenda
to give itself to the greater good.
A community that can live deeply with each other,
in joyful hope,
even when our political visions diverge.

It's not that political differences don't *matter*.
Different visions of how to guide a nation
bring different results.
Sometimes those results impact millions of lives.
So let the open and public debate continue.

But in the church that acts like a church,
there is a greater, and more hopeful vision, that guides our life.
It's a very different thing than the politically-expedient
"reaching across the aisle" that needs to happen in Washington,
and Richmond, and Harrisonburg.
It is the building of brother- and sister-hood
made possible only by the grace of God in Christ,
and it is far more profound, and far more hopeful,

to a fragmented, and watching, world.

So . . . sisters and brothers,
I call us to a deeper life as a healing community.
Our culture needs it *now*.
But so do we. *All* of us.
We need it for every kind of brokenness that we are right now
carrying around in our beings.
Burdens of brokenness, in body, in mind, in spirit.
Burdens of brokenness in our relationships.
There are more than enough burdens
that God's desires to lift and to heal,
in this very healing community,
and *through* this healing community.
We are a community of wounded healers,
and we are a community of burdened . . . burden-lifters.

And as a community, we are invited to come bring our burdens to God,
for Jesus will never say "no."

In the words of the hymn we sang earlier,
*O Christ, the healer, we have come to pray for health,
to plead for friends.
From every ailment our bodies clamor to be freed,
yet we confess that wholeness is our deepest need.
Grant that we all, made one in faith,
in your community may find
the wholeness that, enriching us,
shall reach and prosper humankind.*

—Philip L. Kniss, November 9, 2008