

We heard in the Epistle from James, read by Jean a brief time ago the following:

“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. “

I personally find the stories in the New Testament of Jesus healing the people and, the Epistles, many from the apostle, James, to be fascinating words about faith and healing. So, I am going to speak about this subject, following Rev Susan’s sermon two weeks ago, and I hope you will allow me for preaching a similar message, but from a different viewpoint.

I believe everyone of us has asked for healing, be it something today, or in the past, or will be asked in the future. We ask it for ourselves, for our family, and for others who are in need. It is both one of the most requested spiritual actions someone can ask, and they do not have to be Christian, or in fact of any religion, just a person in need. Someone suffering or in pain or having lost an integral part of their identity. And in desperate want of being healed such that they ask God, as they understand him, for his attention and assistance.

And thus, our healing prayers come face to face with our 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective of medicine, where healing and cure become confused. This is the difference between healing within the stories of the New Testament, among the Israelites in first century Palestine, and our contemporary population that has discovered, in western medicine, the genesis of our diseases and have cured many to live longer lives. These are two quite distinct groups of people, with a vastly different culture and belief system that I will show, play a role in the idea of being healed. I want to dig deeper into what was daily life for our first century sisters and brothers around the time of Jesus, and are there similarities with us today? We both ask to be healed, but there is often a significant difference, widened over two thousand years, in our expectations about what healing means.

First it is important to say that wealth was not the most important value. Even more important, the fundamental value was honor and the public reputation of the family and its members. It must be remembered that the culture was not individualistic; therefore, the honor of the family

and its kin was superior to that of an individual . Honor was achieved by being born into an honorable family or gained via some honorable deeds.

It was challenged all the time and could be lost quite easily. Honor was a limited good related to control of scarce resources including land, crops, livestock, political influence, and female sexuality. Honor determined the position of the family in public and granted a better life. The counterpart of honor is shame. Being poor and especially falling in to extreme poverty was never just the matter of survival, much worse was the lost honor and becoming publicly despised . It was rare for the poor to be publicly respected, and exceedingly difficult to gain back honor that was once lost.

One's status in life was thought to have been inherited by birth. It was not reasonable and honorable to try to achieve a higher status. But losing one's status was shameful. How to lose one status? When the male family member becomes incapable of supporting the family, is unable to pay their debts, they were imprisoned, lost their inherited land, or became ill are a few examples. So, being shamed was the result of some unfortunate events that occur in life, unanticipated if it was illness certainly. As a result, the people who were shamed would not necessarily be a permanent social standing but a sort of revolving category of people who cannot, often due to circumstances beyond their control, maintain their status in life.

Focusing on illness, our first century Jewish people had a few ways to avoid illness. And it was in the laws of the Jewish faith. In the book of Leviticus are hundreds of laws that try to protect the Jewish people from the misfortune of that time. Uncleanliness was believed to be the basis of all diseases and ailments. The practices of cleanliness and hygiene are frequently stated in the Bible . Frequent washing, care of the skin, strict dietary restrictions and sanitary regulations helped to inhibit the spread of diseases among the Jewish people. And yet the people still suffered from ailments, maladies, and diseases, both physical and mental.

The Jewish state in Jesus' time was an agrarian culture, people farmed and consumed much of what they produced after paying taxes. There was no middle class; there was essentially a population of have and have-nots. Ninety percent of the inhabitants of the people of Galilee were at the subsistence level, meaning they could barely afford to feed themselves. It is interesting to note that when Jesus created the Lord's Prayer, when he said, "Give us this day our daily bread," one interpretation of that statement is: Let us have enough to pay for our food THIS ONE Day. It was a rough life. Maternal and infant death rates were high, skin diseases

such as leprosy, parasitic infections, pneumonia, tuberculosis, polio, smallpox plus deafness, blindness, fever, and demon possession, were commonly found among the Jewish people.

In addition to the purity laws, which were more concerned with avoiding illness, there were also medicinal herbs that helped, some of which are in use today: Frankincense and Myrrh (perfect gifts for a newborn), garlic, fennel, tarragon, pomegranate, cabbage, hyssop were all remedies that helped with the symptoms of disease. I imagine that a community garden grew these plants to have on hand for the needs of the people. There were no physicians to help if you did not have wealth. Priests were available to assist in some cases. But it was Jesus who was the one whom people sought to be healed.

If someone, especially an adult male, caught a disease like polio, leprosy, TB or was found to have a mental impairment often cited as being possessed, can you see how the shame factor came into play? If one can no longer work or dies and leaves a wife and children without resources, or is left disabled, he has lost his status. These are circumstances beyond the control of one's ability to avoid. The penalty is losing one's identity, life among the community. If the male has family members who can assist him financially, all may not be lost. But remember, 90% of Galileans were at the subsistence level.

There is one other tenet of the Jewish faith that is negative and has not yet been mentioned. The assigning of one person's illness, usually the result of a birth issue, or a defect, or an accident when the child was an infant, to the father or family of the person affected. This is blindness, deafness, what today we call cerebral palsy, or withering of a hand or foot. An inability to walk. Remember the man at the healing pool whom Jesus healed, and the Pharisees demanded to know if he was the son of his parents? The Pharisees were looking to understand how a person who was being punished by God for the sins of the father, could be healed? Here is where shame comes in as well. How could one argue that there is no connection between the ailment of the child with the actions of his father? The shame here is on both the child and the parent. They are both shamed in the eyes of the religious leaders where God is to blame for their physical problem.

Jesus healed hundreds, if not a thousand, people throughout his ministry. People came to be near Jesus wherever he was, there was such a need to be restored among them. Do you recall the story where the streets were lined with the sick and their families, even one family lowering their member through the roof of a home. This happened all night, and the next day they followed Jesus across the lake where he fled to pray. The love of the families is

astonishing, as is their belief in the ability of Jesus to come to their aid. The bleeding woman who touches the hem of Jesus robe, the Roman soldier asking for Jesus to heal his 12-year-old daughter, giving sight to the blind, healing those with Leprosy, the apostle Peter's mother-in-law, the list goes on and on, to those who asked Jesus and those who did not. Often Jesus' reply in so many words was that your faith healed you.

Now we get to the crux of the question at hand: did Jesus heal, or did he cure? I define healing as a spiritual blessing that encompasses the whole body and soul, while to cure is to remove the illness from the person entirely. Jesus did both, and he worked outside of the cultural honor-shame concept. Throughout his ministry Jesus was ready and spoke sharply to the Pharisees or whomever questioned his spiritual gifts, his relationship with God, his ability to heal and especially to forgive sins. Jesus recognized no shame, even for the woman who was a prostitute he said "Go, and sin no more." Jesus upended the spiritual practices found in Leviticus as he told his followers that God does not punish people with illness or misfortune. This was a change for the Jewish people of that time, a remarkable vision of the present and future by the one called the Messiah. He spoke of a loving God more than anything else, a God who heals anyone who asks. A radical God and a radical Son whose mission was to instill love and forgiveness to all people.

We know of some people in the New Testament stories who were cured but I believe that other were just as likely healed. Using the words your faith has saved you and go and sin no more points to a healing, a spiritual renewal and transformation of the person who has encountered Jesus and is saved.

In our world today with all its technological advances in medicine including DNA maneuvering and all manner of curing the illness of the person who is ill, the focus is always on curing someone from their disease. Curing again, is removing all symptoms of the disease, even if it is a matter of years rather than an entire life. Healing may not give that kind of restoration to the body, but instead embraces the entire person fully and with love. Healing is transformative.

I used this piece from the Rev Frederick Recklau from Partners in Care, in a prior sermon, perhaps you remember? Rev Recklau created a list of fourteen paired analogies to explain the meaning of **cure** and **healing**. I will name a few here and as you listen, think of what each word means.

Cure may occur without healing; healing may occur without cure

Cure looks at what sort of disease a person has; healing looks at what sort of person has the disease  
Cure closes the past; healing opens the future  
Cure avoids grief; healing assumes grief  
Cure seeks to conquer pain; healing seeks to transcend pain  
Cure rejects death and views it as defeat; healing includes death among the blessed outcomes of care.

Now, to be clear, we are at a wonderful time to be alive and have all sorts of medical tools available to help cure us of illness. We are fortunate that leprosy, TB, polio, fever and other illnesses are curable. We should all ask for medical assistance, and to follow healthy practices to avoid being sick. So today, what are we referring to where modern day medicine cannot cure? Some cancers for sure, addictions that are difficult to mend, and lethal viruses that seemingly come from nowhere. Covid was such a virus only 4 years ago. Maternal childbirth and infant mortality, especially among black and brown women, are still with us and point to an inequality in our medical care which is something that we should hold in our sense of shame and correct.

The birth defects can be normalized, people able to walk, use a prosthetic hand or foot; schizophrenia has a new drug just recently approved, the list goes on. For all these ailments, both curable and fixable, they should also be asked to be healed. Healing along with curative medicine does restore people's lives. But we must always be careful to never say that God did not heal someone on purpose. God heals. God gave us all of the resources for modern medicine to invent the means to conquer many diseases.

What I am referencing here is when our medical teams say, Sorry, there is nothing more we can do. Or someone is gravely injured in an accident, or the countless ways people die, including from old age. These circumstances are where healing is so important for the one who is ill, and the family.

These words are why I ask for healing transformation when I pray to God, either on behalf of others, or for myself and family. Healing offers the person acceptance of the symptoms, an opening into the deep spiritual access to our soul, an awareness that there is more to life than our physical bodies, and a place for someone to go and to be at peace. I cannot know which one is called for or what is best for the person. But I do know that everyone is better to be healed, to be more perfect in body, mind, and soul, for it is the touching of God's love on an

aching heart. An end to suffering and a belief in being part of something more precious than our life on earth.

The wise persons among us know that healing is our reckoning with our body in its fullest, most powerful sense of self and an actualization of emptying ourselves to God.

This is the part of Jesus that I love the most, his healing, redeeming quality to all people. It is available to each one of us, whether asked for or not asked. Jesus is always at hand to wrap his arms around us when we are in need. And Jesus is helped in this capacity by his followers, each one of us, to believe in the power of being healed, and to request it for all persons who are suffering. To never stop praying for those who are suffering or in difficult circumstances such as divorce or loss of a job. All people are in need of being cared for by others. Be the spiritual person who asks God for help on behalf of others.

May God heal us all. Amen