

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 14, 2001

“Your Faith Has Made You Well”

Luke 17:11-19; Psalm 66:1-12

10 lepers approach Jesus and ask him for mercy.
Jesus sends all 10 lepers to show themselves to the priest.
 All 10 lepers respond in faith to Jesus’ instruction.
All 10 lepers are made clean on their way to see the priest.
 They are cured of their physical ailment,
 healed of their disease.
But only one leper, one out of the 10, returns to Jesus,
 giving thanks and praise to God.
 To him, Jesus says, “Your faith has made you well.”

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I wonder about this story.
For the past several weeks I’ve been wondering along with others of you
 as we’ve talked in the Wednesday Morning Bible Study,
 and in the Young Adults Class last Sunday.
What does Jesus really mean, “Your faith has made you well”?
 What happened to the one leper who turned back, this Samaritan,
 who returned to Jesus giving thanks and praise to God?
And what happened to the other 9?
 What does faith have to do with physical curing?
In our age of scientific method and medicine
 and the wonders of surgery,
 what can we believe about the connection between
 faith and healing?
Is there a relationship between a physical cure
 and being made “well” – or as the KJV says it,
 being made “whole”?

Of course, it’s not just in the classroom that we’ve wondered about this story.
More than a few of us here have been in the great hospitals of our city
 in recent days.
We have watched friends and loved ones struggle and suffer
 as they seek a remedy for debilitating illnesses and chronic ailments.
So what does this story mean for the woman in a hospital bed
 surrounded by noisy machines
 and half-a-dozen IV bags pouring into her veins?
What hope does it offer the man who spends all night in fitful sleep,
 and wakes in the morning with pains in his body?

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First, it seems only fair to acknowledge the faith of the other 9 lepers
who sought after their healing as Jesus directed them.
Jesus said "Go", and they went.
Leprosy in the Bible probably refers to a wide variety of skin diseases,
all of which caused a person to be considered not only physically unclean
but ritually impure.
Lepers were to be physically isolated from the community,
socially shunned,
and, worst of all, excluded from the worship life of Israel.
Only the priests could pronounce a person "cleansed" from his leprosy,
and thus restore him to the full life of the worshiping community.
So all 10 lepers,
in following Jesus instruction to go and show themselves to the priest,
were acting with at least some measure of faith
that they would be received back into the life of the community.
And they are cleansed on their way.

But still there is something more that happens to this one leper, a Samaritan,
who turns back and gives thanks to Jesus and praise to God.

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In recent years the medical profession has begun to accept the fact that
there is a very real connection between spirituality and physical health.
There is a connection between mind, body and spirit.
Scientific studies have been done which suggest that people can
"participate in their healing"
through the attitude they express about their disease and their treatment.
These studies also suggest that
a person's attitude is improved when she expresses trust
in a Higher Power.

Jon Spiegel is a clinical psychologist and chairman of
the Institute of Psychology and Spirituality at Pittsburgh Seminary.
Dr. Spiegel reminds us that the idea of separating mind, body and spirit
is a recent invention of the Western, scientific world,
occurring only within the last 100 years or so.
Most of the world's population still hold to the very ancient belief
that mind, body, and soul are an integrated whole.

On a personal note,
I know that as my own father has begun treatment for lymphoma
I have been greatly encouraged by his hopeful and trusting spirit;
a spirit that has been sustained by the Christian community,
in his own congregation, and in this congregation,
and in other congregations,
as people have supported him with prayers, and card, and calls.
These simple acts of faith and faithfulness
have resulted in many prayers of thanksgiving,

and, I believe, are an essential part of the healing process for him.

Of course, these affirmations of unity between body, mind, and spirit
lead us to other questions,
and one in particular:

What about those who don't experience a physical cure?
What about those for whom prayer,
even the prayer of the whole community,
doesn't result in the restoration of bodily wholeness?

One of our members here at Glenshaw
shared her story at the Wednesday Bible Study
about her experiences while working as nurse in the Operating Room.
She told of patients preparing to go into surgery
and how some of them come to feel an overwhelming sense of peace
just before going on to the table.

Not all are this way, but some are able finally
to let go of control
and to trust the hands and skill of others to help them,
and ultimately, to trust in the hand of God
who alone can save them.

This kind peace, this kind of trust,
seems to be independent of any kind of physical cure.
It happens deep in the soul of the one who learns to depend on God
as the Giver of all life and every good gift.

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The 16th century reformer, Martin Luther affirmed this connection between
the physical and the spiritual in his Catechism. Listen to how he said it:

"I believe that God has created me and all that exists.
God has given me and still preserves my body and soul
with all their powers.
God provides me with food and clothing, home and family,
daily work, and all I need from day to day.
God also protects me in time of danger and guards me from every evil.
All this God does out of fatherly and divine goodness and mercy,
though I do not deserve it.
Therefore I surely ought to thank and praise, serve and obey God.
This is most certainly true."

Most of us would probably agree with Martin Luther.

But the important question in the Gospel today is not
"What do we believe?"

(Most of the lepers who were made clean probably would agree with Luther.)

But the important question is
"What difference does it make that we believe"?

Does our belief that God is the source of our health and well-being

lead us to “thank and praise, serve and obey God”?

In this story about the leper who turned back to thank and praise God,
we find our calling as the Christian community.

We are the community that calls men and women to a greater wholeness.

We are the community that comes apart from the world

to observe a Sabbath every week,

a day on which we fall down at Jesus feet

to give thanks and praise to God.

We are the community that practices

whole-hearted trust and full-bodied dependence,

because we recognize that true healing – in body, mind, and spirit –

is finally a gift of the One who created our bodies and our souls.

It would be easy to forget this truth in our world of rugged individualism,

in our world that lives according to the myth of self-sufficiency

and independence.

But we in the church are called to remind the world that the path to wellness

is the way of thankful praise.

It is the way of the one leper who stopped,

turned around, and said thank you to God.

And we in the church believe that

the way to walk this path of wholeness

the way to receive the healing power of God,

is not just by turning back, or stopping to smell the roses,

but by turning back *to Jesus*.

It is at the feet of Jesus –

it is at the table of thanksgiving that Jesus prepares for us,

it is at the foot of the cross on which Jesus died,

with his body broken and his blood dripping down

as he breathes his last breath –

It is here that the mystery of God’s power is revealed,

and the depth of God’s healing goodness is poured out,

and the fullness of God’s life is made available

for all the world.

What this finally means – that we find our wellness in Jesus Christ –

is that our hope for healing does not end at the grave.

Our hope for healing is a hope that is greater even than the power of death.

For the man or the woman or the child who lays down at Jesus feet,

no matter the struggle or agony they face in this life,

one day in the fullness of time,

they will hear the voice of Jesus say to them,

“Your faith has made you well”

Thanks be to God.