

“Healing and Wholeness” Mark 2.1–12

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Congregational UCC, 23 Feb 2003

Healing is a totally loaded subject, as far a religion is concerned. If you’re like me, your first impression when I say the word “healing” in a religious context is the show-stopping evangelists who bowl people over and attempt to make them walk without their crutches. Do you remember the leisure-suit-clad televangelist Earnest Angely who used to be on television? To my mind, he was the personification of the bottom-feeding evangelists who sucked the financial resources of people who had given up hope everywhere else. He used to do this schtick in which he would poke his fingers into the ears of a deaf person, wiggle them around, and shout, “Out deaf sprits!” and then try to get the deaf person to repeat the word, “baby.” It was a bizarre freak-show experience.

Well, that’s not the only thing I think of anymore when I think of religious healing. Part of what shifted my point of view was reading Marcus Borg’s book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, which many of you have also studied. Dr. Borg is a well-respected member of the Jesus Seminar and an Episcopal layperson who teaches at Oregon State. Here is what he says about Jesus and healing: “He was a remarkable healer: more healing stories are told about him than about anybody else in the Jewish tradition.”¹

I used to write off a lot of the stories of miraculous healings in the New Testament as being stories perpetuated by the followers of Jesus to bolster his authority (and some of that might, in fact, be the case). But I think there is a sense of historical accuracy in the idea that Jesus had an incredible gift of healing and of exorcism, which are closely related. Healing for Jesus meant not simply curing a disease, but removing social stigma, as well. When Jesus approaches a woman who has been hemorrhaging, he violates the Jewish purity codes. When he heals a leper, he comes into contact with a person his culture considers untouchable. When he goes to a man who is suffering from severe mental illness and lives among pigs, he is entering a setting that is, to his own people, ritually unclean.

Jesus is concerned with crossing boundaries and erasing them. That is part of the healing that he is performing. What are the boundaries that you are afraid to cross? Who are your untouchables?

Let’s go on to the story we heard from Mark’s gospel this morning, about the man living with paralysis whose friends bring him on a stretcher to the synagogue where Jesus is preaching. They can’t get into the building, and their way is barred. But, these fellows are not going to be deterred. They hoist the man up on the roof, dig through the plaster roof, and lower him down.

Jesus sees the faith of the four friends who have gone to great lengths to get their friend in front of Jesus, and because of the faith of this community of friends, Jesus forgives the sins of the young man. It isn’t the faith of the young man living with paralysis – it’s the faith of his friends that wins Jesus’ attention.

Jesus doesn’t even have to touch the young man; he simply says, “stand up, take your mat, and go to your home.”

I think about that when I pray for someone. I don’t think about myself so much as a healer, but rather as one of the friends who is working on behalf of someone who needs healing. When we lift up our joys and concerns during prayers of the people, we’re

¹ Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 31.

acting like those four men who are bearing up the cot, boosting it onto the roof, and lowering their friend into Jesus' presence.

There is a lot about healing that we don't understand, but that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Dale Matthews, a physician writes in his book, *The Faith Factor*, "At one time, medicine and religion were so thoroughly untied that a medicine man was a priest. Many cultures throughout the world still regard their healers this way. In the West, religion and medicine remained closely linked until the end of the medieval period. The first hospitals were founded in monasteries; physicians of this era were usually monks." If you've read the Brother Cadfael mysteries, you know what he's talking about.

The Enlightenment brought about the split between religion and medicine, and it's a division that only now is beginning to heal. In a book called, *Practicing Our Faith*, Dorothy Bass writes, "We live in a society that defines healing as an activity that takes place largely between patients and their physicians or nurses. Christians understand the practice of healing as something much larger than this. The central image for us is not *cure* but *wholeness*. ...healing is an indispensable part of the coming wholeness that God intends for all creation. ...The complete health that God desires for our psyches and spirits – our so-called 'religious' well-being – cannot be separated from our physical selves."²

Numerous scientific studies show psychological and physiological benefits of regular prayer and worship attendance. This isn't to say that if you keep coming to church you won't get ill. But if you do become sick, faith actually helps. And some studies show that it's important to be part of a community, not just going it alone as a spiritual seeker.

Dr. Matthews lists twelve "remedies," that I'd like to share with you:

Remedy no. 1: Equanimity–Taking time out of a busy life.

Remedy no. 2: Temperance–Honoring the Body as a Temple of the Spirit. The old slogan "moderation in all things" goes a long way.

Remedy no. 3: Beauty–Appreciating art and music and the aesthetics of the worship experience.

Remedy no. 4: Adoration–Worshipping with your whole being through song, silence, prayer.

Remedy no. 5: Renewal–Confession and starting over.

Remedy no. 6: Community–Bearing one another's burdens.

Remedy no. 7: Unity–Gaining strength through shared values and beliefs.

Remedy no. 8: Ritual– Taking comfort in familiar activities.

Remedy no. 9: Meaning–Finding purpose in life and a love of humanity.

Remedy no. 10: Trust–"Letting Go and Letting God" as they say in 12-step programs.

Remedy no. 11: Transcendence–Connecting with ultimate hope.

Remedy no. 12: Love–Caring and being cared for.

That all sounds great, but I see them more as the characteristics of our community that will draw us toward wholeness, rather than restoring sight to the blind or enabling a paralyzed person to walk.

When we talk about the miraculous healings of Jesus, we're talking about **curing** more often than **healing**. Jesus cures the paralysis that afflicts the young man. But, he is also engaged in the healing that goes on within the lives of persons and the lives of communities, by breaking down barriers that divide us.

² Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, Jossey-Bass, 1997.

So, if we distinguish curing and healing, what can we do to heal ourselves and others?

One thing we can do is to strive for wholeness as individuals and as a community. In living out those twelve remedies that Dr. Matthews enumerates, we embody the healthy community that we long for. Does that mean none of us ever gets sick? Of course not. It means we have multiple sources of support when we do become ill.

When individuals become terminally ill, I often think of healing as acceptance and closure, rather than cure. I think one can be healed, in terms of coming to grips with disease and death and being in relationship with God and family. But, that doesn't mean a cure.

Many of you are familiar with the hospice movement, which is relatively new in this country. Hospice aims to provide quality end-of-life care to individuals and their families. In 1974, Hospice of Connecticut, funded in part by the UCC, was the first hospice organization in the United States. Today, more than 3,000 hospice organizations, including Hospice of Larimer Country, are providing healing – not curing – for people in the final stages of life and their families.

A poem by Rachel Naomi Remen makes this clearer for me:

O
body!
for 41 years
1,573 experts with
14,355 combined years of training
have failed
to
cure your
wounds.
Deep inside
I
am
whole.

We are, each of us, responsible for bearing each others' burdens. That means that we function as those four friends who carried their companion on a litter to Jesus. How can we lift up those who travel the way with us?

I saw this happen last week here at Plymouth. And I saw it happen at the hands of people in this congregation caring for the family of a woman, not a member of Plymouth, whose funeral we held here.

One member of the Board of Deacons was here to run the sound system, light candles, and make sure everything was right. Half a dozen people baked cookies and made coffee and set up tables and put on a lovely reception that created a warm, welcoming space where people could grieve and celebrate the life of a wife, mother, and friend.

It's one thing when you see this happen for a beloved member of the church, and another when people come together for someone they didn't even know. I see it as a concrete act of caring that helped the healing process of a family. Each person who assisted helped to lift up the mat and carry it. It makes me feel really wonderful about being part of a community of faith that knows how to answer when someone asks, "Who is my neighbor?"

We extend a healing touch beyond the walls of this local church through our efforts at Habitat for Humanity, the Mission here in Ft. Collins, and through United Campus Ministries, and many others. We help provide healing through the myriad community groups that use our facilities: whether it's the Girl Scouts, the Restorative Justice program for youth offenders, or Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. We are a healing presence through our giving to Our Church's Wider Mission, which extends our reach across the Rocky Mountain Conference, throughout the United States, and around the world.

Healing takes on different forms, and **all** forms of healing are needed. May we each find the healing we need, and may we each help to share the healing power God has entrusted to us.

I would like to close with a prayer from the Medical Mission Sisters:

God our Mother,
Living Water,
River of Mercy,
Source of Life,
in whom we live
and move
and have our being,
who quenches our thirst,
refreshes our weariness,
bathes
and washes
and cleanses
our wounds,
be for us always
a fountain of life,
and for all the world
a river of hope
springing up in the midst
of the deserts of despair.
Honor and blessing,
glory and praise
to You forever.
Amen.