

**June 28, 2015**

**Mark 5:21-43**

**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

What does it mean to you that St. Andrew's is a faith community that has identified the importance of healing in its ministry and life together?

I ask this with a bit of wonder and the utmost respect, because over my lifetime I have been involved with 15 congregations, and I don't recall ever being part of a congregation that has taken the ministry of healing so seriously and approached it with such loving intentionality as St. Andrew's.

Your experience may be different, but it seems that many who would identify themselves as Christian, and even many churches, just do not know what to make of the ministry of healing. Some might think healing is something better left to charismatic and Pentecostal believers. In mainline churches, healing rarely seems to get the same kind of air time as theology, study of Scripture, and instruction on the Sacraments.

Today's gospel reading takes us right into the midst of Jesus' work as healer. Mark's gospel emphasizes that healing reflects the presence of God's saving power, and Jesus' saving and healing presence demonstrates that the kingdom of God is near. Mark gives us here a healing story "sandwich", if you will, a story tucked within another story. We meet 2 very different people, living out drastically different life circumstances. But they have one thing in common: both are in desperate need of Divine intervention.

We meet first the man Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He would have been wealthy and influential, accustomed to having others beg him for favors. He approaches Jesus publicly, with a crowd thronging right along with him. Most importantly, he comes as a father desperate to save the life of his 12 year- old daughter who is near death.

In contrast, (and at the same time), there is an unnamed woman in the crowd, who comes alone, no man with her as her husband. She is socially isolated and alienated because she is ritually unclean. She approaches Jesus unobtrusively, wanting her identity to remain unknown. She has suffered from a bleeding disorder for 12 years. Her financial resources have been exhausted. She has been to see every doctor she can think of, and her condition has not improved. It has actually gotten worse.

Both Jairus and the unnamed woman have faith in Jesus' ability to change their dire circumstances, confidence in his willingness to meet their need. Both exercise boldness and courage, and a willingness to risk thinking outside their usual social and religious "box". Desperation will do that, won't it?

In both cases, human contact is part of the healing, and in both cases Jesus takes the time to engage with the one who is in need of healing personally and intimately. In both stories, physical healing occurs, as well as social restoration, which is an important dimension of being made whole, which is one definition of healing. Among some other

definitions of healing are: “to restore to health”; “to cause an undesirable condition to be overcome”; “to restore to original purity or integrity”.

**So what do you think healing is, really?** Rarely does it occur like it does in these gospel stories, as an instant cure. We know sometimes that healing can last for a short or long period of time. Illness sometimes returns. Jesus’ interactions with these 2 desperate people who seek him out provide some clues to help us understand healing at a deeper level. Healing it seems is more about a dynamic process than an end result.

Did you notice how Jesus is willing to be interrupted? He takes the time to attend personally and listen to the one in need. The social status of the person wasn’t important to Jesus, nor their state of respectability according to religious law. Jairus has to wait while Jesus tries to identify who touched him, and when he does, Jesus then speaks directly to the unnamed woman, who admits she is the one who was healed. In both stories, the one seeking healing is accepted completely by Jesus. The woman is affirmed for her faith. Jairus is encouraged to keep on believing, even in the face of a situation that looks hopeless to others. Being accepted by Jesus leads to honest human encounter and deeper intimacy. The unnamed woman by the end of her encounter with Jesus is now called “Daughter”. For Jairus, Jesus enters his home, sends the mourners and naysayers away, and in the intimate setting where the girl’s body lay, Jesus restores her back to life, reminding her parents to give her something to eat.

Do you get a sense of the caring and compassion, the attentiveness of the Holy One that accompanies healing? These 2 stories suggest that ***healing is really a dialogue of grace between us and God where we honestly offer up our need to God and wait with hope and trust for God’s good and gracious response.***

The thing to remember is that we are designed to work in partnership with God. So it is then that we can help or impede our own experience of healing. Too often we impede healing because we are unwilling to acknowledge and offer up our need to God. Most of us really prefer to keep our woundedness under tight wraps. We work hard at hiding our inadequacies. We minimize our deep need of God, preferring to make a go of things on our own. Miraculously almost, there are moments in life when we are blessed with a sense of desperation. People in recovery from addictions, especially drug and alcohol addictions, refer to this as “hitting bottom”. It is that point when life has just become a mess that can no longer be managed by limited human power, and the person admits their need of a “Higher Power”. It is at this moment that healing begins. The gateway to healing is admitting our need of God’s power and loving intentions towards us.

Sometimes we don’t recognize healing when it comes in a form different than the way we prayed and asked God to meet our need. We have limited seeing. Sometimes we have pretty fixed ideas of what healing should look like. If the outcome doesn’t meet our expectations – then what?

Biblical commentator Michael Lindvall writes about a friend of his, a man of deep faith, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease when he was still in his fifties. He and his wife prayed that he might be healed. Twenty years later, he is in the last debilitating stages of the disease. Nevertheless, the friend once told Lindvall that his prayers had been answered. He said in all sincerity, "I have been healed, not of Parkinson's disease, but I have been healed of my fear of Parkinson's disease." When healing does not come in the way we had hoped and prayed it would, Lindvall writes reflectively: "It may be helpful to remember that prayers for healing are not simply utilitarian. Prayers for healing are not simply a matter of bending God's will toward my will, my hopes, my needs. To ask something of God is to edge into deeper relationship with God."  
*[Commentary, Feasting on the Word]*

Always God's response to us, God's purpose in reaching out to us is to draw us deeper into loving relationship with God and each other. We know healing does not always come in the form of cure or recovery. Sometimes healing comes as peace and acceptance in the face of disappointment. Sometimes healing comes in the awareness of the continuing presence of God in our times of despair. Sometimes healing comes in the form of human touch – in tears shared, a hand held, a gentle hug, a hand on the shoulder – all of which remind us that we are not left alone and isolated with the difficult circumstances we face.

Rachel Naomi Remen, a physician who works on making the world of medicine more human, tells a story from one of the workshops she leads for physicians, to help them recover what it means to touch another with healing intent. To help them remember that touching can be a way of experiencing the presence of God's Spirit. At one point in the workshop she has them practice touching each other with healing intent. One physician described his experience of this exercise:

*"At first I thought I would just play it safe, but after Jane told me about the pain she usually has in her back, I decided to take a chance and tell her about my divorce, which was final last year. How hard it had become for me to trust women. She asked me where I felt this pain, and I couldn't actually say it, so I touched my heart. She nodded . . . Then Jane put the palm of her hand on my chest. I was really astonished by how warm her hand was, and how gently and tenderly she touched me. A little at a time the warmth of her hand seemed to penetrate my chest and surround my heart. I had a sort of strange experience. For a while there, it seemed to me as if she was holding my heart in her hand rather than just touching my chest. That's when I felt the strength in her hand, how rock-steady she was, and in a funny way I could feel that she was really **there** for my pain, committed to being there, and suddenly I felt I was not alone. I was safe. That's when I started to cry."*

Here then, is what a church that takes on Jesus' work of healing as part of its own ministry might look like:

In a healing community, human need is met with compassion and caring.

In a healing community, there is no sense of shame or judgment present when woundedness, brokenness, and needs are expressed.

In a healing community, respectful human touch and connection is present and welcomed.

In a healing community, willingness to be honest and vulnerable is honored and respected.

In a healing community, relationships with others grow strong, healthy, and resilient.

In a healing community, prayer is a regular and essential practice, as important as breathing.

In a healing community, people experience being drawn closer to God and others.

In a healing community, people feel safe.

***Healing. It is a dialogue of grace between us and God where we honestly offer up our need to God and wait with hope and trust for God's good and gracious response.***

Pray that we may always be open to that ongoing dialogue of grace, for our world desperately needs that touch of God's healing presence and power. Amen.