

“Faith Healing”
Mark 1:40-45
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Westminster, Greenville
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If you don't mind indulging me for a moment, I'd like to invite you to participate in a little exercise with me this morning. I'd like you to think about words that ought not go together. Words that should not be put together...

For example:

Which...Carolina?

Let me explain a bit.

When our family was visiting Greenville in June, before we had moved but after we knew we were coming here, I had the opportunity to meet a few members of WM who were also parents of elementary-aged children. And I asked what I needed to know about living here, and one person told me how college football was a really big deal, and how there's a rivalry between Clemson and Carolina.

To which I said:

“Clemson and Carolina...which Carolina?”

And he said, “Ben, that's an offensive question around here...”

I'm learning. It's taking a while, but I'm learning.

Which Carolina? I will never ask that question again.

Those two words do not go together.

What are other words that do not go together?

Spontaneous...Presbyterians.

Do I really need to explain this one? I don't think I need to explain this one.

Shakespeare knew the power of words that do not go together.

Do you remember the opening scene of *Romeo and Juliet*? Romeo has not yet met Juliet...and he suffers the pains of loving another who does not love him back, so he says to his cousin:

“O brawling love! O loving hate!...
O heavy lightness! serious vanity!...
Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health!
Still-waking sleep, that is not what it is!
This love feel I, that feel no love in this.”

Why did I begin with this exercise?

I began with this exercise, because now I'd like you to turn to your bulletin, The Harbinger, and make a judgment about the title of this sermon.

Faith...Healing.

Do these two words belong together?

When you add faith + healing, you can get into a lot of trouble real fast.
All sorts of questions come to mind:

- If we pray for healing for a loved one, do those prayers have any effect on the healing that does or does not take place?
- If God participates in healing in any way, how do we explain why one person gets healed and another person does not?
- If God is not responsible for healing in any way, why do we bother with prayers for those who are sick?

Certainly we can NOT say that people who receive the gift of healing are people with a stronger faith...so what can we say?

I raise the topic this morning because we are in the midst of our sermon series on “Words of Faith”. Our word for this morning is “healing”—I almost did not choose this word. Dangerous word. Not a clean and tidy when it comes to mixing it with faith.

It's tempting to keep those two words apart, but what's fascinating to me is that the Bible does NOT try to keep these words apart.

In fact, there are almost 20 healing stories in the first 10 chapters of Mark's Gospel alone. Sometimes, the link between healing and faith is explicit—like when the woman in the crowd touches Jesus, and Jesus says to her:

“Daughter, your faith has made you well...”

In today's text, it's not so explicit, but it's there.
The leper says to Jesus:

“If you choose, you can make me clean.”

Jesus replies, ***“I do choose. Be made clean!”***

Of course, the problem in our text lies with those three little words:
“I do choose...”

Jesus chose to heal that person on that day.
But what about people who do not receive such a gift?

Years ago, the Baptist minister John Claypool lost his 8-year-old daughter to cancer. He could not help but share his grief with his congregation, and in one sermon, he talked about the importance of QUESTIONING GOD:

“There is more honest faith in an act of questioning than in the act of silent submission, for implicit in the very asking is the faith that some light can be given.

“This is why I found such help in a letter I received from Dr. Carlyle Marney. He admitted he had no word for the suffering of the innocent and never had, but he said:

‘I fall back on the notion that God has a lot to give an account for.’¹

¹ John R. Claypool, “Life is Gift,” in *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler: Living and Growing through Grief*, Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2004.

Maybe that's the first thing that needs to be said when we start mixing the word "healing" with our faith.

When our prayers are not answered,
when someone we love is not healed,
ONE faithful response—is anger.

Indignation.
To grab God by the lapels, and ask, "Why??!!"

Of course, it's not a new question.

What we're talking about today is a version of the theodicy problem. What's theodicy? Theodicy comes from two words: the Greek word for God and the Greek word for justice.

If you haven't heard the word theodicy before, you've probably heard of the problem before. It usually goes like this. Three points, but you cannot reconcile them:

1. God is all loving.
2. God is all powerful.
3. Bad and terrible things happen.

You know how this works, right? If God is all loving and all powerful, then bad things shouldn't happen. But they do, so if God is all powerful, then God is not all loving. But God is all loving. So does that mean God is not all powerful?

Which one of these three propositions goes out the door?

Through the years, there have been numerous attempts to provide an answer to this dilemma...

For example, in his novel *The Eighth Day*, Thornton Wilder suggests that human life is like a tapestry. We often experience life from the underside of the tapestry, a mess of broken threads, tangled yarns, nothing that we would be proud to create. But there is another side, a “good” side to this tapestry...and that side is indeed beautiful and has a pattern and a discernible order.

God knows the design, because God created the tapestry, and God can see both sides. We cannot see it, but God can see it. Thornton Wilder seems to suggest that what’s bad and terrible is not really so bad and so terrible.

If only we could see both sides...

I recall Rabbi Harold Kushner’s response to Wilder’s proposition. Kushner wrote the book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, and in it he wrote about the death of his 14-year-old son, Aaron.

In that book, Kushner dismissed the “beautiful tapestry” of Thornton Wilder...because no tapestry could POSSIBLY be worth all the pain and suffering in this world. As Kushner writes:

“If a human artist...made children suffer so that something immensely impressive...could come to pass, we would put him in prison. Why then should we excuse God for causing such undeserved pain...?”²

I completely agree.

God would be immoral to create a picture on ONE SIDE that somehow required an underside of cancer, tsunamis, terrorism, and despair. So Kushner simply concluded that while God is certainly all good, God is not all powerful. Kushner gets rid of proposition number two.

Now we could spend the rest of the day discussing the theological history of how different thinkers have tried to solve this problem. From process theology to Calvinist theology to Thomas Aquinas to Augustine...

² Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, New York: Avon Books, 1981.

But when push comes to shove, none of the answers really do it for me. Because the problem of theodicy, the problem with faith healing—at its heart, it's not an intellectual problem.

It's an EMOTIONAL problem.
It's a RELATIONSHIP problem.

It's not just about our relationship with the person who is sick.
It's about our relationship with God.

The retired Presbyterian professor of preaching Tom Long tells the story of a church that he attended many years ago. It was a congregation that really valued intellectual rigor in their sermons, and sometimes this was a good thing, and sometimes it was a detrimental thing. Sometimes, in the midst of intellectual loftiness, CLARITY got sacrificed at that pulpit.

Long says that one long-time member once put it to him like this:

“I haven't understood a sermon that's been preached here in 25 years,” this church member remarked. “But I'll tell you one thing. I'd never leave this church.”

Every Monday night, he and some other members went to visit a nearby prison for youth offenders.

“Sometimes we play ball with the kids.”

“Sometimes we have a little Bible study. Most of all we just get to know them as people. I started doing this because Christians are supposed to do things like that, but now I find that I get a lot from it myself.”

And then he said this:

“I have found that you cannot prove the promises of God in advance, but if you live them, you find they are true, every [single] one.”³

³ As told by Thomas G. Long, in his book *The Senses of Preaching*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988.

You and I cannot prove the promises of God in advance, but if we live them out, they will be true...what does that mean?

I think it means this:

God has not promised us that everyone we love in this life
will be healed in this life.

And God has not promised us long life, or pain-free life.

God has promised us GOD:

IN ALL OF God's grace, God's presence,
God's power, and God's love...

I say God's power...please remember.

God's power is known not in strength, but in weakness.

God's power is known not in conquest, but in the Cross.

Those of you who were here last week may remember the story from Craig Barnes about his premarital counseling session with Mike and Sue. How years ago, Mike was so afraid of losing Sue, that he was terrified of getting married...you remember this?

They did get married.

And Barnes lost track of the couple through the years.

Then, not so long ago, Barnes was preaching at a church and told the story about Mike and Sue, how we need to receive our loved ones for the gifts of God that they are...and he was surprised to receive an email from one of the members of that congregation.

It was a friend of Mike and Sue's.

And Barnes was "devastated" to learn in that email—not that Mike lost Sue too soon, like he was afraid would happen, but that it was Mike who died too early, of a heart attack at age 50.

So Barnes found Sue's email address, and reached out to her, offering his condolences.

Sue replied: “[Mike’s] death is inexplicable in any logical sense, but I very much feel this is part of the mystery of life. In the six months that have passed, I can say I revere this mystery. I don’t want or need to understand everything about our lives on this earth.

And she included a photograph of Mike wearing a “Best Dad Ever” T-shirt, surrounded by their two kids on Father’s Day.

Sue concluded by saying, “I would think one of the pleasures of marrying young couples who are deeply in love is to see the product of that love decades later.”⁴

*You cannot prove the promises of God in advance,
but if you live them out,
they will be true...*

Friends, where I land when it comes to the words “faith” and “healing” looks something like this:

1. I agree with Sue. Life...is a MYSTERY.

Our job is NOT to solve the mystery.
Our job is NOT to say, “This is how God must behave.”

Our job is to figure out how we will behave.

How we will keep putting one foot in front of the other,
one step at a time, one day at a time,
trusting the promises of God.

2. Whenever healing DOES occur, part of our job is to give THANKS.
Because while God’s healing power and love may be mysterious to us,
that does not make it any less of GOD’S GIFT to us.

Do you believe that?

⁴ Craig Barnes, “The Temporary Gift of Marriage,” in *The Christian Century*, June 14, 2017.

Do you believe that healing is one of God's gifts?

If you do, then there's only one thing for us to do with such a gift:
Share it.

Share God's gift of healing—be someone whom God might work through...
As a doctor, as a nurse,
as a teacher, as a parent...as a member of this church.

Share God's gift of healing, in whatever ways you know how...

A number of years ago,
a church group gathered to talk about times in their lives
when God was close and real.

“One of the group was a dancer in a professional ballet company.
When it came time for her to speak, it was clear
that she was more comfortable as a dancer than as a speaker.

She spoke hesitantly, haltingly.

She reminded the group that she was raised in that particular church.
She described the sanctuary,
including the baptismal font,
and she said that she was baptized as an infant right in that very font.

She did not remember this, of course, but she said that her father was very proud at that moment and that when she was a little girl, he would often tell her of the Sunday that she was baptized.

He would describe the baptismal dress that she wore,
he would remember what hymns were sung
and what the minister had said in the sermon,
and he always ended the story by clapping his hands together
and exclaiming, ‘Oh, sweetheart,
the Holy Spirit was in the church that day!’”

She never forgot what her father said.

In fact, “as a child, she would go to worship on Sunday with her parents and wonder, **‘Where is the Holy Spirit in this church?’**”

She would look at the brass organ pipes,
at the rafters in the ceiling,
and at the stained-glass windows,
and she would wonder, **‘Is that where [they keep] the Holy Spirit?’**

Then she paused, and said,
‘As many of you know, I lost both of my parents to cancer
in the same week, a terrible week, last winter.

During that awful week,
on a dark, Wednesday afternoon,
I was driving home from visiting my parents in the hospital,
and I was passing by the church.

I felt an intense need to pray,
and so I came into the church and sat in one of the back pews
and began to pray.

The church was dark, and in the shadows,
I prayed and poured out my grief to God,
and cried from the bottom of my heart.

A member of the church [she gave her name] was in the kitchen preparing a meal for a church meeting, and she saw me praying and knew what was happening in my life. She took off her apron, came and sat beside me in the pew, held my hand, and prayed with me.

‘It was then,’ the young woman said, **‘that I knew where the Holy Spirit was in this church.’**”⁵

⁵ This story is told by Thomas G. Long in his book, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

Not just that church, right?

This church too.

You and I cannot prove the promises of God in advance.

But if we live them out...

one step at a time, one person at a time,

those promises will be true—

and they will be HEALING...

Amen.