

**Wesley United Methodist Church**

**March 14, 2021**

**Listening to God**

To Find Healing

So I Can Live Out God's Call

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:11-13

Mark 5:24-34

I've been thinking a lot about healing and health recently. Some of that, I'm sure is because it has been a year since the World Health Organization declared that we are living in a global pandemic. Some of it has to do with the increasing availability of a Covid vaccine and the second shot that I am scheduled to receive in a few days. But when I think about healing and health, I also think about a lot more than physical health. As important as physical health is, when I think about health, I think also of emotional, mental, and spiritual health.

The World Health Organization defines health as "complete physical, mental, and social well-being."<sup>i</sup> I believe that they have left out spiritual health as well. However, their definition of health makes it clear that health involves all parts of our lives, not only our physical well-being.

In today's gospel reading, we heard about a woman touching Jesus' robe so that she could be healed. When you hear that story what do you think about? How do you react? Do you get excited about her, her determination, her courage, and how wonderful it was for her to be healed? Or do you maybe think about people you know who have waged huge battles against illness like she did and have not experienced physical healing? Do you think about how Jesus stopped what he was doing to pay attention to this woman – a woman who because of her illness was who was not supposed to be in a crowd, who was not allowed to socialize or even live with her family.

Do you perhaps think about the times when you have prayed desperately to God asking for a particular outcome? Sometimes it seems as if the prayer is answered exactly the way we want, and other times it may feel as if there is a deafening silence. Sometimes we cherish prayer as the most important connection in our lives, and sometimes we may wonder why we even bother. I've come to understand that the most

important thing is not how we pray, or what we pray, but that we do pray. The immediate results are not, or should not be, the primary focus of our prayer, but rather what happens in prayer – the ways that we are changed by our interaction with God, by meeting God in prayer.

I've preached many sermons on this passage and I could tell you a lot about this woman whose desperate prayer was to touch Jesus' garment, to be healed and to escape unnoticed. I could also tell you about Jairus, a synagogue leader, whose daughter Jesus was on his way to heal when he was interrupted by this woman's touch. We have a man with a name, a religious insider, with financial resources who came up to Jesus, told him about his 12-year-old daughter who was close to death and asked Jesus to come with him and heal her.

We also have a woman described only by her disease, a walking hazard to ritual purity, with no money because she has spent it all on doctors. She was so desperate that despite knowing she should not be in the crowd, she snuck up behind Jesus, convinced that if she could just touch his robe, she would be made well. She had no intention of disturbing Jesus; no intention of interrupting him. She didn't need – or want – him to speak to her or acknowledge her presence. She wanted only to touch his robe, convinced that she would be made well and then disappear into the crowd. "She was down – but not out. She was still thinking on her feet, still searching for an angle, still trying to make something happen."<sup>ii</sup>

When she touched Jesus' garment, she got exactly what she had wanted in response to her prayer and action. Immediately, she knew that she had been healed. But it didn't stop there; because when you interact with Jesus, you can't control what happens. In the same instant that she touched him and was healed, he also felt power going out of him. He questioned who touched him. His disciples thought he was crazy; there were many people around him; it would be impossible to know who had touched him.

But he knew. And it was important that he stop, that he face her, that he speak with her. It was important that he acknowledge and recognize this unnamed, poor, suffering woman. It was important to give some dignity to who she was. Jesus was

always interested in the whole person, so besides her physical healing, Jesus made sure that she knew she had received more.

He called her “daughter.” Jesus restored her to be able to fully participate in community. He declared her well – not only physically, but now, also socially, and emotionally, mentally, spiritually. For Jesus it is about relationship, and he declares that her faith has made her well. But faith is not a finite resource and her healing does not prevent the healing of Jairus’ daughter. Jairus does not need to lose just because she wins.

When I think about health including not only physical well-being but also mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being, it becomes more obvious that because one person wins does not mean that someone else has to lose. When we provide good medical care for those who have the least resources, this does not take away from the medical care for those who can afford the best. When we are intentional about educating the children with the least obvious advantages, this does not in any way detract from the education of children with many resources. In that education, it is also important to pay attention to the whole child, to be intentional about feeding their bodies, providing breakfast and lunch or weekend backpacks of food for some and basic medical care, shelter and clothing.

A child who was born to a penniless family, sickly as an infant, suffering ill-health most of his life, educated at a school for impoverished children where there were frequent playground fights and where most children were beaten by their teachers for small mistakes, grew up to be Alfred Nobel, the man who invented dynamite and ultimately bequeathed over ninety percent of the enormous fortune that he made from explosives to fund the Nobel Prizes.

The agricultural industry was changed by a child born into slavery. When slavery was abolished in America, his former masters raised him and his brother and taught them to read and write. Later moving from school to school seeking knowledge, and struggling against discrimination, rejected by universities, he began homesteading. In 1891 he became the Iowa State Agricultural College’s first black student, obtained a master’s degree in Botany, and became the college’s first black faculty member. George Washington Carver improved the agricultural economy of the United States by

promoting nitrogen-providing peanuts as an alternative crop to cotton to prevent soil depletion.<sup>iii</sup>

The prophet Jeremiah declared, “For I know the plans I have for you, plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope.”<sup>iv</sup> These words were directed to Israel, not to an individual. They are, to me, an indication of God’s plan that we should live together in peace, and hope, that we may together all live lives that are healthy in all the ways that really count.

So many of we humans are in need of healing, healing of so many kinds. This week I read, “Everything Happens for a Reason (and other Lies I’ve loved)” by Kate Bowler. Kate was a young mother who had recently earned her doctorate in theology and was teaching at Duke Divinity School in 2015 when she was diagnosed with Stage IV Colon Cancer. Her story was inspiring, especially as she dealt with the many people who tried to tell her that God had given her the cancer for a reason.

In her book, Kate focuses on a whole lot more than simply physical healing. One of her comments really jumped out at me. In speaking of someone else, she wrote, “My friend is stuck, but if he were unstuck, oh, he would conquer the world. But first he must stop carrying the weight of disappointment and comparison.”<sup>v</sup>

Her words reminded me that there are so many ways that we need healing; things that are getting in the way of us being all that God created us to be and knows that we can be. It reminded me that it is in daily turning to God in prayer that we are able to begin the healing that helps us become unstuck.

When I was offered my first appointment as a pastor, a friend said to me, “I received a message that you will have a ministry of healing.” Then she gave me a rather strange look and asked, “You’re not into that stuff, are you?” I knew what she meant. She was thinking of the image of faith healers who make a big show of laying their hands on someone who cannot walk and having them stand and walk perfectly. I do not know anything about that kind of healing, but at the time it was the only thing we thought about. We had a good laugh and thought that this was one case where the messages that she frequently believed she received from God had been short circuited.

What I discovered over the next few years, was that I frequently heard the word “healing” applied to my ministry there. It wasn’t anything I did, and it certainly wasn’t

physical healing. It was the healing that God does when another person is willing to sit and listen to someone's pain. It was the healing that God does when another person can see someone as a beloved child of God, someone to be valued and loved until that person also starts to believe that he or she is someone that God loves. It was the kind of healing that takes place when a group of people are willing to work together as a community or as a church on something bigger than their individual needs.

It was the kind of healing that we are all called to participate in as vessels of healing, and the kind of healing that we are all called to receive as wounded children of God. It was the kind of healing that invites and allows each of us to be healed so that we can finally live out God's call in our lives. It was the kind of healing that comes in and through us when we are faithful about nurturing our relationship with God through prayer – in whatever form that may be.

Kate described those first few days after her diagnosis while she was in the hospital trying to figure out what was going on and waiting for surgery. She wrote, "At a time when I should have felt abandoned by God, I was not reduced to ashes. I felt like I was floating, floating on the love and prayers of all those who hummed around me like worker bees, bringing notes and flowers and warm socks and quilts embroidered with words of encouragement. They came in ... and mirrored back to me the face of Jesus."<sup>vi</sup> That's the healing in which we can all participate. That is prayer in action.

A pediatric oncologist friend of hers helped her see that, "We would need to prepare to think beyond 'cured' and 'dying' and think, instead about how to get me from one good outcome to another."<sup>vii</sup> I think that's God's plan that Jeremiah talks about, that's the healing that most of us need, and that God is ready to help us with, healing that helps us get from "one good outcome to another".

The greatest healing for her came as she identified that she had lived by loving what she thought was possible for the future, her hopes and dreams, rather than loving what was present right then in her life. She decided that she needed to learn how to live in ordinary time and not to try to skip to the end.

Her advice to a friend was simply, "Go live your life. ... Live unburdened. Live free." I believe that is what Jesus was saying to the woman who touched his robe and to each of us. "Go live your life. Live unburdened. Live free." Live your life in

relationship with others. Be healed of the things that get in your way, of the things that others have hung upon you and that you continue to carry. Be healed and live out God's call to be all that God knows you are able to be with the Holy Spirit walking along beside you.

Let us pray:

O God of love, and healing. You know the things that get in the way of us being fully alive, being fully your beloved, being fully all that we can be. Heal us from those things that weigh us down and help us to know that we do not carry them alone. May we not only be recipients of your healing in our lives but help us to also be agents of healing for others that together we may live out your plan for the world, a plan for peace and a future with hope. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Feasting on the Gospels, Mark. P. 364, Theological perspective on Mark 5:24b-34

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid p.372

<sup>iii</sup> These two examples taken from [11 Great Scientists Who Rose From Harsh Beginnings \(famousScientists.org\)](http://famousScientists.org)

<sup>iv</sup> Jeremiah 29:11

<sup>v</sup> Bowler, Kate. Everything Happens for a Reason (and Other Lies I've Loved), p.43

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid, p.76

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid, p.85