

Healing Community

Acts 5:12-16, John 21:15-17

The First Church of Christ in Hartford, CT

April 15, 2018

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Wow. Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, tells us that Peter's spirit for healing was so powerful that people felt healed *if even just his shadow passed over them!*

Peter. Let's remember about Peter. He was a fisherman from Capernaum in Galilee; this is the equivalent of nowhere special. Though apparently a natural leader, nevertheless Jesus several times speaks to him harshly because of words or actions. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus' last night alive, Peter kept falling asleep when Jesus asked him to be present with him as he prayed. When Jesus was arrested, Peter denied even knowing him because he was so afraid for his own life. Three times. He failed as a disciple so often.

Not so different from us, really. And yet, like us, called by Jesus to carry on his ministry in the world.

Sometimes when I reflect on my own life and my abilities and my call, I ask Jesus, "What were you thinking?" I'm so not Mother Theresa or Martin Luther King, Jr. or Oscar Romero, or, or, or.... These are people who really lived out their discipleship. I don't believe I can do what they did.

Then I remember Peter. It's no accident that the risen Christ asked Peter **three times**, "Do you love me?" Peter had denied knowing Jesus three times, so Jesus wanted to make sure Peter reached deep inside to make a decision about the future. Peter needed to face up to his failures and then decide if, somehow, he could love Jesus; he could tend the lambs and feed the sheep. He could be a vessel for the Spirit's power. And Jesus, believing there was more to Peter than Peter believed about himself, sent him out to love.

A couple of months later, here's Peter, a great healer and preacher. He's tending Jesus' lambs by telling them about Jesus and also carrying on the healing ministry which was so central to Jesus' ministry. By faith and the

great gift of the Holy Spirit, some of the disciples, though ordinary people, were able to heal physical illnesses and disabilities, just as Jesus had done. Because so often we associate faith and healing with fakery, charlatans who scam people out of money by pretending to heal people, we have, I think, forgotten that being a community of healing defines the church from its very beginnings. That healing came not from trained medical people, but by the gifts of the Spirit and the power of prayer and faith and community among flawed disciples like Peter.

I do not have the gift of being able to physically heal diseased people, though I have known a few people who, by faith, have had that gift. It is not missing from the modern church, though it is rare. However, I do not think that excludes us from Jesus' call to tend the lambs and be a community of healing even as our ancestors were. What does that look like now, for those of us without that gift of healing illnesses? Bear with me as I make a couple of suggestions.

First of all, Jesus often connected forgiveness and healing. Actually, the first healing the risen Christ did was to forgive his disciples, a healing which opened them up to being able to serve as healers. People often mistake this as meaning that illness was a punishment from God for some kind of sin. Jesus refutes that idea more than once. When people who are ill ask me what they have done to deserve an illness, it makes me weep that they think of God as one who would punish some sin by giving them cancer. No, no, no, no, no! However, you know that when you are carrying around guilt about something, it weighs you down and can make you sick. When you are able to admit it, to give it to God, and to receive forgiveness, your very body is lighter, your mind is clearer, your heart is less broken, and you may find healing. Those of you who have experienced AA know that admitting your addiction is a critical first step! They actually are like the church in that. That's the same reason why we make space in worship each week for confession! It is preventative medicine, urging us to continually admit that we are not perfect and ask God to forgive us and give us strength to overcome whatever traps we fall into. "Lead us not into temptation," we pray, "but deliver us from evil." This is a community of forgiveness, which is sometimes hard to do, but we practice it here so we can put it into practice elsewhere.

Second, we are a healing community by practicing hospitality. You know the words "hospital" and "hospitality" come from a Latin word

describing a place of shelter for a stranger in need. We don't need to have the gift of miraculously healing illness to offer hospitality to those in need. The early churches did a lot of that. Jesus asked Peter to feed and tend the sheep and lambs, which sounds like hospitality to me. This is not just the kind of hospitality that provides a place or a meal, however. It calls us to go deeper into human connections. The theologian and pastor Henri Nouwen wrote: "Hospitality is the ability to pay attention to the guest." (*Wounded Healer*, p. 89) We're called to pay attention to each other and to the others who come seeking shelter here. Not to categorize or ignore or label them, or to see them as a way for us to get discipling points, but to **see** them in their whole humanity. "If you love me," the risen Christ said to Peter, "pay attention to the lambs." The most vulnerable ones. Children, the poor, trans folk, those experiencing racism or abuse, immigrants, refugees. When we pay attention, we don't just offer food and shelter, but companionship and advocacy.

That relates to another way we are to be a healing community. Prayer. The kind of prayer that pays attention fully. The kind of prayer in which we are **fully present** to one another and to God. The kind of prayer not lifted up as a last, desperate resort, or a rote list of concerns, but as a way of opening a channel for the flow of the Spirit to move through and between us and each other and us and God. Peter's shadow had no special healing powers. But because of his own suffering and struggle, his own need to open himself to Jesus as a cracked but willing vessel, and his deep love for the lambs, Peter and other disciples became channels for God's healing power, and even more so as they came into relationship with those who suffered in the early Christian community. Many of the early believers were the vulnerable ones, people who came in the midst of one kind of pain or another, and in the early churches they found acceptance, love, care, hospitality, forgiveness, and ultimately, healing hope.

The message of that early community was, in the much later words, again, of Henri Nouwen, "The Master is coming. Not tomorrow, but today. Not after all our misery has passed, but in the middle of it. Not in another place, but right here, where we are standing." (*Wounded Healer*, p. 95) Prayer says that God is here, right now, and that there is healing power in that relationship waiting to be received.

There are very few places in this world today where people can come to find forgiveness, acceptance, hospitality and a community

dedicated to helping each other open channels for the healing Spirit to work on us in whatever way is needed. We at Center Church are called to be one of those places, a community that invites people to discover God, who is not in the revenge and punishment and abuse business, but in the lamb-tending business.

In the fourth chapter of Acts, we read that Peter and John encountered a man who was lame from birth, poor, and asking for money. They had no money, but they called him to rise up and walk, and, we're told, he responded by "walking and leaping and praising God!" The religious authorities responded by arresting Peter and John, wanting to know by whose power and authority they were healing. Peter and John testified to them about Jesus, from their hearts. Then we read this: "Now when they (the religious authorities) saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary people, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus." Whether we are educated or uneducated, ordinary or extraordinary in the eyes of the world, my beloved let us be recognized as companions of Jesus, healers as he was. Let us tend each other, and all Christ's lambs. Amen.