

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena, Illinois
The Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell
5th Sunday after Epiphany February 8, 2015
Mark 1: 21-45, Isaiah 40: 21-31

The summer after I finished seminary, I attended a national denominational women's conference. It was great—wonderful worship, inspiring preaching, terrific company, and, well, just being in Boston. On Saturday afternoon, the conference planners had arranged with several downtown churches to use their worship spaces for a variety of healing services. At that time, healing services were not common in our churches. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I was curious. I chose Church of the Covenant—an early 19th century neo-Gothic church redecorated by Tiffany late in that century. But it was not the gorgeous Tiffany windows that I remember—it was the soaring chancel that had been transformed into a garden by the Vermont church women. A garden of real plants and trees and even a flowing fountain with the towering backdrop of a cut paper banner with healing images of poplars, lilies, other flowers, and flowing water. The liturgy was punctuated with Taizé and Celtic music, accompanied by recorder and Celtic harp.

When it was time to go forward to the healing teams for the laying on of hands and anointing, we went individually as the rest of the congregation remained seated and surrounded us in prayer. I prayed for my ailing father, who was suffering with ALS.

Two years later, I was part of a trip to England that combined visiting literary sites such as the homes of Thomas Hardy and Lawrence of Arabia with a cathedral pilgrimage. We arrived at Salisbury Cathedral just in time for a late afternoon healing service in the Lady Chapel beneath the magnificent "Prisoner of Conscience" windows. That time, I knelt and requested prayers for a parishioner who was in the late stages of cancer.

Both times, I so hoped for healing—really for a CURE—that whatever mysterious energy or divine intervention might happen here and take away the pain and suffering, restoring my dad and my parishioner to health. Sadly, that did not happen in either case. My dad died just two months after my Boston trip. My parishioner succumbed to the cancer.

Jesus' healings that we read of in the Gospels are always dramatic and mostly immediate whether they involve demon possession, physical disfigurement, fever, or even death. Jesus intervenes, and the person is cured and restored to the community. In today's expanded story, we read of the very first part of Jesus' ministry after his baptism by John, his forty day journey in the wilderness, and his calling of the first disciples. He rid a man of the demonic spirits that bound him. He healed Peter's mother-in-law who lay seriously

ill in her home, and he cured another man of the leprosy that had made him unclean and forced him to the edges of his society.

We wanted Jesus' healing, too, for my dad and my parishioner—don't we all?—for ourselves or for our loved ones who suffer. After all, Jesus did charge his disciples to go forth and to heal in his name, so why can't we have it, too? Today we might look with suspicion upon some of the more spectacular healings of people charged to throw away their crutches. Yet we hear from credible sources of unexpected cures—the tumor that disappears, the paralyzed accident victim who regains the ability to walk against all the combined knowledge of specialists. These may be written off to inaccurate diagnoses or mixed up test results. Still, there are those that cannot be explained away. And we wonder. Why is this one healed and not my loved one? Sometimes it is the most faithful of people who suffers the most and someone who seems to have no faith at all who experiences the miracle. Is God capricious in healing or not? Does God play favorites? Or is it us? Do we have too little faith—or pray the wrong prayers? Maybe there's a formula that we haven't figured out. I know that when we begin our healing ministries, when we instruct healing ministers, we wrestle with the question, “what is it that we are doing” when we pray with people for healing?

I wonder if these same questions are the reason that healing rites and practices disappeared from the church for so many centuries? Even 25 years ago, we wouldn't find healing ministers or healing services in many churches. There is evidence that healing by clergy and lay—and in the liturgy—continued into the 2nd 3rd and 4th centuries. But by the 5th century, it had become an exception. For one thing, St. Augustine proclaimed that healing was only part of the apostolic age. At some point, a major shift took place—an understanding that illness was God's punishment for sin. The only rite that remained as a regular part of the church's ministry was the last rites, preparation for death.

The rise of rationalism and later, the Enlightenment and advances in science and organized medicine contributed. We began to try to explain the healings away because of the lack of knowledge of disease in the 1st century—what was thought to be demonic possession was probably epilepsy. Leprosy was really one of several skin diseases—perhaps the “heartbreak of psoriasis.” Of course, even though liturgical rites disappeared, other practices remained among the people—their faith in holy relics, saints, and shrines have continued uninterrupted.

It was well into the 20th century when the renewal began. We began to recognize the interrelatedness of mind, body, and spirit. We are recovering a respect for knowing that is not limited to our minds and reason. As healing services and ministries in our churches

became more common in our churches, though, we continue to wrestle: what is it that we think we are doing? How is it that healing comes even when a cure does not?

I've learned that sermons are supposed to end with Good News—with a promise. Sometimes, though, that Good News is hidden in the questions the questions! And, there are some things we do know:

- God does not will our suffering or send illness or disaster to punish us.
- The God who calls Creation “good” desires that each of us be whole.
- We do not control healing by having “enough” faith or praying the “right” prayers.
- All we can do is get out of our own ways and open ourselves God’s love. This is true for those who pray for their own healing and for those who serve as healing ministers.
- Healing happens in various ways and not always in the way we would prefer or on our time schedule.
- Those of us who go through suffering whether or not our health is restored, are changed.
- And—we are not alone no matter what happens!

Today’s story is not just about the miraculous healing of a sick woman and leper or the freeing of a man from his demons and restoring all of them to their communities.. It tells us that this healing came at a great cost to Jesus and his ministry. You see, these miracles were broadcast far and wide. Jesus, who had plans for carrying forth his ministry in various towns, was mobbed by the hordes of people who crowded around him—some out of curiosity, some because of the healings, but maybe not for the teaching. And the teaching—the proclaiming of God’s Kingdom—was his primary purpose. He healed because the need was great. But the message went beyond that. It was to heal the nations and its people from oppression. To unbind them from their rigid and unjust ways and show them the Kingdom as God wanted it. To free them—and us—from all that keeps us from God, from one another, from wholeness.

We are told that Jesus could no longer go into the towns. He had to stay outside “in lonely places.” The people kept coming. He continued to heal, but he didn’t heal everyone. The good news is that he meets us in our own lonely places and accompanies us in the darkest moments of life. Even when it doesn’t seem like it to us. Even when, as we look at the world around us, we can’t see much healing and unbinding. But He is there with us. When we pray together for our world and for those on our prayer list on Sunday mornings. When the Servants through Prayer remember us in their daily devotions; when some of you step through that door for prayers of healing and anointing. He is there.

“Our prophet Isaiah knew that: Have you not known? Have you not heard?” he asks.

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless....those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Amen.