

“JESUS, OUR HEALER,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, October 11, 2020

This morning we gather for our annual “Healing Sunday,” underscoring the keen relationship between our faith and our health. The relationship is more than confirmed by the Bible. Both Old and New Testaments have their share of profound healing stories.

In the Old Testament, for instance, we see Miriam, sister of Moses, healed from leprosy by a prayer of her brother. (*Numbers 12:1-15*) A little later, we encounter the Syrian general Naaman—for whom my own five year-old grandson is named--healed by the Old Testament Prophet Elisha in the muddy waters of the River Jordan. (*2 Kings 5:1-14*) And there’s more. Lots more.

However, faith and healing really take center stage in the New Testament, especially in the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We see and hear back-to-back examples of this in our morning lesson from the Gospel of Mark. In the sweep of a single chapter, we encounter Jesus healing men suffering leprosy and possessed by evil spirits, and a mother-in-law beset with an alarming fever. (*Mark 1:21-45*) There is no disease or evil spirit that Jesus is afraid to confront. In each instance, he emerges as the victor from the fray. Or better said, faith is the victor and God is the conqueror. Indeed, as Jesus in his great personal modesty and humility makes clear, he is merely the vessel for the good things that happen.

Ironically, in all these gospel healing stories we do see the danger of too much of a good thing. Jesus’ ministry is multi-faceted. While he gives time to physical healing, his larger purpose is to call sinners to repentance and reconciliation with God and our fellow men and women, preparing us all for the coming of God’s kingdom and ultimate reign. Teaching, preaching, and proclamation are just as important as healing. However, Jesus gets typecast by the crowd as a healer alone. People beset by physical ailments and disturbances just want someone to fix them. Often, they’re not inclined to examine what might prompt their problems in the first place. Nor do they always give evidence of a willingness to change their mindset which can contribute to their own healing and keep them healthy. They want Jesus to do it all. Then they trot off healed without all that much appreciation.

Representative of this is Luke’s story of the ten lepers whom Jesus heals. (*Luke 17:11-19*) Only one healed leper returns to thank him—and that guy, surprisingly enough, is a Samaritan that just about everybody but Jesus scorns.

Consequently, we sometimes see Jesus pulling back from those crowds chasing after him for healing help. In other moments, we observe Jesus almost swearing to secrecy those whom he has just healed. (*Matthew 9:29*) But such efforts to break out of typecasting prove fruitless. The crowds always find Jesus. (*Matthew 14:13*) Those healed invariably trumpet what he has just done for them. (*Matthew 9:30*) Moreover, Jesus invariably relents. Regardless of how weary and beleaguered Jesus feels, he faces up to it all and does so graciously. Truly, his well

of compassion for those in need never runs dry. Indeed, as the Gospel of Matthew recalls: “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (*Matthew 9:35-36*) Such compassion is one more very beautiful thing about Jesus as our savior.

Be it as it may, Jesus shows us in all these moments that healing can be done in many different ways and that there are also different kinds of healing which are important. In one gospel verse Jesus truly shows himself to be a hands-on healer. To heal a blind man Jesus applies a poultice to his eyes. Jesus prepares this remedy by a mix of dirt and his own saliva. (*Mark 8:22-26; John 9:6*) In another instance, Jesus heals the ailing servant of a Roman centurion by means of a distant-delivered command. (*Matthew 8:5-13*) However, as he instructs his apostles and commissions them for healing ministries in his name, Jesus emphasizes the sheer power of prayer. Indeed, when Jesus and his apostles encounter a particularly malign spirit throwing a young boy into the most terrible convulsions, Jesus counsels his apostles that “this kind [of sickness] can only be cast out by prayer.” (*Mark 9:29*) He then shows how it’s done.

With the insights granted him as both God’s son and an ordinary human being like us, Jesus clearly recognized that the causes of illness can vary. Sometimes, as Jesus directly and indirectly affirmed, illness is the result of sin and our own foolishness and stupidity. In these circumstances, we can bring it on ourselves. This is why Jesus believed that personal moral repentance could be essential for healing on both an individual and wider, communal basis. (*Matthew 4:17*)

Yet in other cases, as Jesus knew, illness and disease are a byproduct of our stress and distress--the result of fear, anger, and anxiety on our part that can and does lead to all kinds of psychosomatic afflictions. Jesus addressed these situations in terms of demon-possession. Again and again, throughout his ministry, as reflected in our morning gospel lesson, we see Jesus casting out demons, bringing peace and calm to troubled psyches or souls. (*Mark 1:23-27, 323-34*)

At the same time, as he went about healing so many, Jesus made clear to all who had ears to hear that there are men and women who suffer handicap and disease through no personal fault of their own or through any choice on their part. In one instance, Jesus actually breaks up a dispute among his very own disciples who are arguing over who’s to blame for the condition of a man blind from birth. (*John 9:1-5*) Some of the disciples speculate that the blind man’s parents must have been sinful. But Jesus sets them straight. Without jumping into the middle of his disciples’ argument, he first discounts the notion that blindness is a divine punishment intended to keep unworthy people from reading scripture, as most Jews of his day thought. Jesus then goes out of his way to explain that “neither this man nor his parents

sinned,” but that his blindness from birth provides an opportunity for a display of God’s healing, as well as compassion on our part. (*John 9:3*) Jesus models all this by going right ahead and healing the blind man in God’s name. (*John 9:6-7*)

Overall, one of the greatest gifts of Jesus’ healing ministry is his emphasis on the fact that we have a loving God who always seeks our redemption and healing. God, Jesus teaches, wants us to be as whole as possible. (*Mark 5:25-34*) This knowledge of God’s desire for our wholeness can in and of itself aid our healing. By it we are reassured that God is on our side, loving and caring and concerned about our welfare, rather than judgmental and punitive, out to get us.

Time and again, Jesus, rather than grandstanding and trying to amplify his own importance, says to those who are recipients of his ministry in God’s name, “Your faith has made you well!” or “Your faith has made you whole.” (*Mark 5:34; Luke 17:19*) Folks, most simply and best understood, faith is trust. The fact that the people who come to Jesus are prepared to trust in God’s love and concern for them dissolves obstacles to healing and opens them to heretofore untapped well-springs of well-being that God has made available from the start.

In the absence of the unique gifts that Jesus demonstrated as God’s own son throughout his earthly ministry, faith and trust may not be able to remove or cure all human ailments. Nevertheless, as Jesus sincerely taught, faith and trust can still move mountains. (*Matthew 17:20*) Through faith and trust in God on the part of ordinary human beings like us, overwhelming challenges can be reduced to manageable, livable size. And I know this from my personal experiences with two different cancers.

Even in the absence of full physical healing, rich, deep spiritual healing is possible so that even if and when a storm continues to rage, it is “well with our soul.” On this note, we can all take heart from the inspired words of the Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Romans. There he declares that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” (*Romans 8:28*) He then goes on to rhetorically ask, “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, give us all things?” (*Romans 8:32*) “No,” Paul then fulsomely answers, “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor demons, neither the present, nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.” (*Romans 8:37-39*) Congregation, this is a bold confidence in which we can all share as God’s beloved children and disciples of Christ.

Right now, as we all so well know, we are in midst of a global pandemic that has swept our nation, our state, and our local communities. Daily now this pandemic touches our lives. I suspect we all know someone who has been infected by Covid-19. It may be a household member, a neighbor, a friend, or a friend of a friend or those, like our president and First Lady,

in public life. It's scary for us all. Yet through it all, we need to remember and affirm that we are not abandoned or forsaken. As proclaimed by Jesus Christ, we have a God who loves us, who wants to help us get through all, and seeks to see us healed.

Contrary to what some apocalyptic pastors might preach, God did not send this virus upon us as judgment and punishment. Instead, Covid-19 represents one more mutation of nature which--with a kind of free will of its own—can go awry and amuck. Yet the consequences of this pandemic are going to be their own judgment upon us if we exacerbate it by acting capriciously and callously, rather than thoughtfully and generously in the defense of human life. To avoid adding to sorrow and tragedy all around, how important it is for us to mobilize all of our human resources not only to check the pandemic's spread but to care for each other as Jesus Christ always calls us to do. As Jesus said to his own disciples in the face of the handicap of a blind man, the affliction before them was an opportunity to show their own hearts—whether they were men and women mired in the selfishness that breeds complacency, or a people of true piety, principle, and faith spurred to compassion. (*John 9:3-4*) Jesus remarked then and there that “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the World.” (*John 9:7*) As Jesus' present-day disciples, we need to be a light to the world.

Unfortunately, the demons that beset so many folks in Jesus' day beset us too, no doubt compounded by the necessary isolation that the virus has imposed on us. Loneliness, depression, grief, anxiety, fear, anger and doubt grip many souls today, compromising our ability to be the men and women for others that God wants us to be. But just as Jesus exorcised demons from those convulsed by them, he can help us break free of whatever negativity possesses and immobilizes us if we stand up and stand firm in our faith and trust in the loving God that he personally exemplified and shared. If you remember what Jesus declared to his disciples, only prayer can cast certain demons out. (*Mark 9:29*) For this reason, we need to be praying too and praying diligently and hard in order to invoke more deeply the divine love that is our own to claim and that can not only heal us personally but help us become founts of compassion and healing help to others in this troubled world.

Faith in God might not alone cure this pandemic. Yet it can help us be better, more decent people in the thick of it and thus avert through God's guidance and grace even greater tragedy and sorrow for us all. Meantime, we should not forget that God has also made possible doctors and medical wisdom for our benefit. We need to honor and respect their God-given gifts and talents for everyone's benefit. And as we pray, let's also give thanks for all the other resources that God places at our disposal for the good, particularly at a time like this. Let's not overlook or take them for granted.

God bless us. God help us. God heal us. In Jesus Christ, **Amen.**

Exorcising Demons: Prayers for Healing and Hope

St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor

Loneliness – O God, in this time when circumstances isolate us and keep us at a remove from those we love and cherish as family and friends, we are feeling lonely. Remind us of your own abiding presence and help us to reach out creatively, but safely, to others so that we are not beset by loneliness even in those moments when we find ourselves alone. In Jesus, **Amen**.

Depression – O God, each day dawning can feel overwhelming. We wake up and don't want to deal with what awaits. There are moments when it's so hard to get motivated, finding the energy for our next step and the one after that. An emotional numbness besets us. In these troubled moments when depression waylays us, send your spirit to uplift and guide us, heart and mind. Reassure us that as we get going, you are walking with us. Spur us to reach out to others for encouragement and support too. In Jesus Christ, **Amen**.



Grief – O God, great is our grief in this time, where we openly acknowledge or keep it buried deep. We are grieving that life just isn't the same. We grieve in anticipation of the fact that it may never be again. Then too, we grieve because of the loss of family members, friends, and acquaintances, near or far, whom we cannot visit right now or will never see again because this Corona virus has taken their lives. As you have comforted the faithful in times past, be our comfort and strength. Keep us mindful of the resurrection you promise in Jesus--not only at mortal life's end but also in the midst of life as we seek to bravely face, cope, and prevail over loss. In Jesus Christ, **Amen**.

Anxiety – O God, sometimes we don't even know what's bothering us. Instead, we just feel unsettled and uncertain in every way. We walk through the days rattled. These are the woes of anxiety and an anxious heart. God, you know us even better than we know ourselves. Help us to better identify and clarify what may be amiss with us or what disturbs us so. And, meantime, bring balm and calm to our quivering spirit. In Jesus Christ, **Amen**.

Fear – O God, as much as we may not want to admit it, we often walk in fear—fear for ourselves, our family, our friends, our neighbors, and even our nation. As this health crisis continues, what will become of us all? Who might be impacted next—and most? Each day we walk conscious that we are not in control: that's scary, Lord! Help us to remember and accept that in this life we are never really in control and that's why we

always need you—your wisdom, guidance, and love. Keep our fear from getting the better of us, morphing into desperation or panic. Grant us courage through a faith in your love that we might live unafraid in spite of trouble and uncertainty. In Jesus Christ, **Amen.**

Anger—O God, how often we disguise our loneliness, depression, grief, anxiety, and fear by lashing out in anger towards you and others. Such anger lends us a momentary sense of mastery and control. But beyond that first gratifying rush, it accomplishes little or nothing at all. So often anger just hurts others, including those who really do love us. While we know that Jesus got angry more than once, he never made a habit of it. Instead, we revere him for the patience he displayed even when most sorely tried. He is patient with us still. Help us each to model ourselves after Jesus, keeping any anger in check while we examine whatever is causing us to act out in mean and rude ways. Nurture in us deeper insight and acknowledgment about our need for you and the righteous, gracious way of your son. In Jesus Christ, **Amen.**

Doubt--O God, a man who came to Jesus for help, pleaded, "I believe; help me with my unbelief!" How like that man we can all be, not least of all in these months of pandemic. We have faith, but not enough: our trust comes mixed with doubt. Sometimes, God, we just don't think we're worthy enough to receive your help--as if your help is something we are obliged to earn. In other cases, we do wonder if, amid the vastness of your creation and the struggles of so many, you're too distracted elsewhere to hear *our* prayer or to be alert to *our* needs. In all such questioning, however, we display our littleness which is not able to comprehend or grasp your greatness. Open wider our own hearts and minds to recognize the signs that you bestow day after day reassuring us that we are not forsaken in our needs and that you are a God always faithful in helping us find a path through our troubles to a better tomorrow and a blessed life. In Jesus Christ, **Amen.**

Prepared G. Drutchas