

Week of February 28, 2021

Matthew 8:1-17

¹ Now when Jesus had come down from the mountain, large crowds followed him. ² A man with a skin disease came, knelt before him, and said, "Lord, if you want, you can make me clean." ³ Jesus reached out his hand and touched him, saying, "I do want to. Become clean." Instantly his skin disease was cleansed. ⁴ Jesus said to him, "Don't say anything to anyone. Instead, go and show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded. This will be a testimony to them."

⁵ When Jesus went to Capernaum, a centurion approached, ⁶ pleading with him, "Lord, my servant is flat on his back at home, paralyzed, and his suffering is awful." ⁷ Jesus responded, "I'll come and heal him." ⁸ But the centurion replied, "Lord, I don't deserve to have you come under my roof. Just say the word and my servant will be healed." ⁹ I'm a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and the servant does it."

¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he was impressed and said to the people following him, "I say to you with all seriousness that even in Israel I haven't found faith like this. ¹¹ I say to you that there are many who will come from east and west and sit down to eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the children of the kingdom will be thrown outside into the darkness. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth." ¹³ Jesus said to the centurion, "Go; it will be done for you just as you have believed." And his servant was healed that very moment.

¹⁴ Jesus went home with Peter and saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. ¹⁵ He touched her hand, and the fever left her. Then she got up and served them. ¹⁶ That evening people brought to Jesus many who were demon-possessed. He threw the spirits out with just a word. He healed everyone who was sick. ¹⁷ This happened so that what Isaiah the prophet said would be fulfilled: He is the one who took our illnesses and carried away our diseases.

The Healing Ministry of Presence

I'm lucky in that I've only ever had to be hospitalized one time in my life - when I was 5 to have my tonsils removed. I don't remember much about the experience, which isn't surprising considering my age at the time and that it was nearly 30 years ago. Others are far less fortunate, suffering various maladies that require intensive treatments by all sorts of medical professionals. What many sick people go through was something totally foreign to me until I was chaplain at Wake Forest Baptist hospital. There I was assigned two areas to serve - the surgical waiting room and a floor of the cancer center filled mostly with people who were undergoing treatment for various cancers of the mouth. The two settings could not have been more different. One of the things I learned very quickly in the surgical waiting room was that people there, by and large, are very uncomfortable seeing a chaplain come to them while they waited for news on their loved ones' surgery. They always thought I was coming with bad news, when all I wanted to do was check on them and offer to pray with them in an effort to ease their anxiety. But my presence tended to make people more anxious. It was a very different experience when they asked for my presence, only then could I bring a sense of calm. I didn't have these struggles on the floor of the cancer center. There I couldn't carry on conversations with patients, many of whom had just had portions of their tongue removed or some other procedure making it difficult to speak. I learned there that being present, even if not speaking, could bring calm. Everyone else from the hospital staff that visited them poked and prodded, for many good reasons of course, but my only role was to sit with them and care for their spiritual needs. I had many awkward visits; I've always struggled with silence, but as I became more and more comfortable with the setting, I was able to have some really impactful visits, too. The 9 months or so that I spent at Baptist taught me a lot about the ministry of presence, how it can be helpful and hurtful, especially for those who are

sick or worried about loved ones who are sick.

After Jesus preached to the multitude from the side of a mountain about how God really wants us to live, he went out and showed people by his actions. The very first occasion Jesus had to show he meant what he preached was an encounter with a man with leprosy. Lepers were made outcasts for good reason - they had incurable skin conditions, many of which were highly contagious. No one wanted to get anywhere close to them for fear of catching their condition, a real fear which could not only be life altering, but deadly. And not only were the skin diseases dangerous, but Jewish law called any such skin condition unclean, and touching someone would make you unclean and require a cleansing ritual for full participation in the life of the community. All this made lepers marginal. Princess Diana made world news when she shook the hands of an AIDS patient in 1987, beginning a long process of destigmatizing the disease. Pope Francis, in 2013, made news by kissing the head of a man with neurofibromatosis, which left him horribly disfigured, and again, the act helped destigmatize those with debilitating skin conditions. But before Princesses and the Pope, Jesus did something more shocking and more amazing. A leper approached him, itself a social taboo, and proclaimed to Jesus - "if you want to, you could heal me." It was a proclamation of faith, but also a request to be seen. He didn't demand to be healed or make a scene, he simply came to Jesus, kneeled, and made a humble statement. We know Jesus could have said the word and healed the man, but he took it a step further - he reached out and touched the leper. This would have been seen as unfathomable, but Jesus did it to show not only God's mercy and love, but to show everyone the kind of affection we are to have for one another. Taboo and cleanliness rules were all thrown out, love was the only aim.

The second occasion came in Capernaum, when a centurion approached Jesus. Again, this is a big deal - centurions were agents of the empire and not seen as someone with whom you should be friendly. But once again, Jesus showed love and mercy to someone where everyone expected animosity or division. Again and again, Jesus broke social norms to bring healing. He not only healed diseases of the body, but diseases of culture and society. He was present with people no one else would interact with, and it broke down barriers. Many of us are not trained medical professionals, so the idea that we are called to heal may sound untenable. But we can heal social diseases by being present with those whom society marginalizes. We can recognize the humanity in those who have been stripped of it. In that way, we can bring a healing similar to that of Jesus, even without a medical degree.

Loving God - your presence in our lives gives us love, hope, courage, and so much more. May we, who seek to be more like Christ each day and who have so transformed by his presence, learn to be present with our neighbors. May we recognize their humanity and heal the place society has harmed by offering our love and compassion. Amen.