



Sermons
from Northwood United Church
“God of more than the gaps”
Luke 7:1-10
Will Sparks June 2, 2013

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Well friends for the last part of this week a candle has been burning on the communion table, a candle which gives expression to a longing for healing. As many of you went on with your daily lives but always had in that praying part of yourself the wellbeing of Ryan Fedele, struggling in the hospital, Shelli and I tended a candle on here, on your behalf. And so to hear that he is better today is great news and we are grateful. And with the lighting of that candle and the offering of our prayer for his healing, we enter into the question of healing and prayer. What is the relationship between healing and prayer? What really are we doing when we pray for healing?

I have no intention of unraveling the mysteries of these questions in the short time we have here today. There is a great mystery in these questions that I am not sure I will unravel in my lifetime, much less in this sermon time today. However, it is a question worth pondering because it is often the place where our theology, what we believe, takes on its most practical, down to earth application. What we pray and how we pray is where the rubber hits the road on our faith. If you want to know what someone really believes, look at their pocket book, and look at what they pray. We are going to look at the latter for a few minutes today.

The people who came to Jesus figured they had this mystery of prayer and healing sorted out. The local Roman centurion wanted Jesus the healer to come and heal one of his key staff people. And the Jewish establishment knew this guy well. He had been good to them. Built the town hall. Surely if anyone deserved the spiritual goods that Jesus offered, this guy did. So the people frame the question of healing and prayer in terms of whether you have earned it. Whether you deserve it. But even before they get to the centurions place, word is brought to Jesus. This commander, used to making things happen with a word, used to getting things done, is powerless in the realm of healing, and does not see himself as worthy of Jesus’ house call. He frames the question in terms of worthiness. Is he worth the trouble?

But the thing that really catches Jesus’ attention is his humble trust. “I am over my head, but I believe that you are not. Help me.” And that acknowledgement and trust moves Jesus.

So as we puzzle through this mysterious realm of prayer and healing, this story tells me that it is not about deserving it or being worthy of it, this story points to that familiar place where there is a gap in power between what we feel able to cope with and what is needed- this guy and everyone around him are over their heads (that’s familiar territory), and in this and so many other stories of healing it would appear that humble faith matters. There is no room in these situations for arrogance, or demanding. Kneeling is the posture of this topic.

The question of healing is particularly challenging for 21st century western people who live in a society used to making it on our own cleverness. Back in Jesus’ time, and actually right up until the last couple of hundred years, there was so much more about our physical health that was a mystery. But modern medicine has pushed that mystery to the margins. People used to be at a loss to know what to do much sooner than we are now. Whereas people used to pray pretty much at first sniffle or cough, we wash our hands more regularly, and reach for the antibiotics. So we often only pray when we come across a gap in our own ability to command the universe

and it obeys. But when the universe stops obeying, then we confront mystery and turn to God in prayer, but only after exhausting all other options.

And I understand that. It makes no sense to ignore good hygiene and wonder why God would let the infection happen. We do know things about health and healing. But God is not confined only to the places where our knowledge runs out. God does not conform to and stay within a box created by our willingness to acknowledge the mystery behind it all- the things we think we have figured out and the things that remain beyond us. God is the God of all of it. But we tend to acknowledge God only as a last resort, when our own cleverness runs dry. We are like the immature teen, wanting independence, to “do it ourselves”- “Go Away!” And God, like the wise parent, knows more than we think, is more present than we know, has good parental connection with everything- “Mom! How did you know that?!”- is more present than we know, is ever close but incognito, watchful, patient, loving. God will be God, as the United Church Song of Faith puts it “Holy Mystery, beyond complete knowledge, above perfect description. Yet, in love, ... (she) seeks relationship.” God will be God, unconfined by us, mystery behind and beneath it all.

Yet still we do turn to God when we are up against it, in need of healing, deliverance, forgiveness, whatever we need when we find ourselves up against the gap, the mystery. The wise among us don't wait for the desperation to get too bad, but make a habit of turning to God all the time. The wise among us look for God in medicine, not just outside of it. The wise among us hold the doctors, nurses, and all the rest of that system in prayer all the time, recognizing God's presence and activity in it all.

But we are not always wise and we do turn to God with our desperate longing for healing. And I find great assurance in Jesus' reassurance that God's desire for our healing is not about whether we deserve it or are worthy of it. But the mystery of God meets us and bears down on the places in life where our longing is genuine, and our trust is open. These two things, longing and trust, seem to be the common elements present not only in the healing stories of Jesus, but in life when we find ourselves where the centurion found himself. Longing for healing; in humble trust in the face of the mystery of life.

I don't have it all figured out. I don't know why sometimes things take a turn for the better and at other times they take a turn for the worse. But I do believe that when we bring our genuine, sometimes desperate longing to God in prayer, and when we trust in the mystery that is God to meet us there, we find resources we never knew existed, spiritual resources of strength and courage, community, hope and healing more than we ever could have imagined in our cleverest moments. Thanks be to God. Amen