

Over the next six weeks we are going to be looking at recovery ... healing, wholeness, restoration from six different perspectives. You will be invited to allow Jesus to touch these areas and move you to wholeness. We will also consider how we as a church, the Body of Christ, and outpost for the Kingdom of God ... How we can be a "health hub" through our ministry and mission. We are being made new, transformed. How can we offer transformation to others? We don't have to wait for our transformation, our healing, our restoration to wholeness to be complete before we offer it to others. We are all works in progress. We can invite others to come along on the journey with us.

In these six weeks we will be focusing on six different areas.

- Today we begin with Physical health
- Feb 28 - Community and Economic Health
- March 7 - Mental Health
- March 14 - Intellectual Health
- March 21 - Health of the Natural world
- March 28 - Integrated Health

All of our Scriptures will be from the 8th and 9th chapters of Matthew. We'll jump around a little bit, but this week we begin at verse 1 of chapter 8. Jesus has just completed the Sermon on the Mount, and he show us how it is lived out. Hear the Word of the Lord.

Matthew 8:1-4, 16-17 (RSV)

When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; 2 and behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you [choose], you can make me clean." 3 And he stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I [do choose]; be clean." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. 4 And Jesus said to him, "See that you say nothing to any one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to the people."

16 That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick. 17 This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases."

The word of Life.

Thanks Be to God!

Sermon *Holy Vessels: Treasure*

For most of us it is not hard to remember a time when we felt left out of a group. You didn't belong. You weren't welcomed, weren't invited, weren't good enough. We feel some empathy with the leper, but few of us have experienced something so dramatic as the turnaround experienced by that man in his encounter with Jesus.

There was good reason that lepers were not to have close contact with other people. This skin disease was also described as "living death." It was highly contagious, painful and disfiguring. The people who had leprosy had

to live outside the community. They were shunned by the people in the community as a danger through no fault of their own. People were afraid of lepers. They were "untouchable."

As I was thinking about this, I was reminded of the song, "He Touched Me." It begins, "Shackled by a heavy burden // 'Neath a load of guilt and shame." Nowhere in that song does it mention sin. It could be implied by the phrasing of suffering under a load of guilt and shame, but have you ever felt guilty or shameful just because of the way you are, not because you actually did anything wrong. And we're back to those memories of when we weren't welcomed, invited, or good enough. Maybe that has never happened to you, but it's happened to me and people that I know many times.

When you think of this leper who knows that his physical person puts other people in danger, and there's nothing that he can do to change it on his own. Yet, he longs for contact with others, even the ones who shun him, maybe especially the ones who shun him. Feelings of guilt and shame are natural. The most gentle touch that he would have had might have been an object that was thrown at him to keep him away. Can you imagine Jesus touching you in this moment? It might have been scary. It might have even hurt at first.

Maybe **we feel untouchable** or unworthy of notice, unworthy of love ... or at least we think that we are considered that way by others. We feel broken, not good enough, no matter how hard we try. Other parts of our lives may be great. Others, who don't know the whole story, may even envy us, but not understand our brokenness inside, the places where others can't see. Physical, mental, or spiritual. Of course, brokenness in any of those areas can affect the others.

I can't help but see a parallel in our time between the status of this leper and people who have contracted COVID. I keep tabs on what is happening here in Wallowa County, as I'm sure many of you do. The comments on official news releases are interesting sometimes. (Disclaimer: I never recommend reading the comments on articles online or social media. Most often that way leads to madness of several different kinds, yours, theirs, anger, confusion, etc.) But on these posts, I can see the kinds of things people are thinking in the comments about new COVID cases. People want to know who, where specifically in the county, was it part of a bigger group gathering, was it a local resident or a visitor. I'll admit to curiosity myself, as a form of protection for myself and the people I love. And yet, I can see why that information is not provided.

It would be putting those ill people at risk who are already fighting something that is potentially life threatening to themselves or the ones around them. Do you think that they might feel guilt and shame? People would naturally judge them. How did they miss the mark? Masks, physical distancing, etc. You know I support those things, but even with all of that, it only *reduces* the chances. It doesn't make it impossible. That is the reason that we are not worshiping in person, but that's another story.

That's a question we should all ask ourselves, are we trying to figure out how someone with a positive COVID diagnosis missed the mark? *How they sinned?* When maybe they didn't "sin" at all. Now, they're ill, and they need care. That's all that matters. In a way, we are all lepers now. We don't know who has the virus and who doesn't, so we prudently avoid contact with others to avoid putting them in danger.

Just like Jesus can say to the leper, "I do choose," Jesus can say to us, "I do choose." Jesus can also say to the COVID patient, "I do choose." Even if they made ALL the wrong choices. That is grace. Whether it is this or

any other of life's challenges. Grace is what Jesus offers us even though we are unworthy, even though we miss the mark. Jesus crosses that gulf, that divide, and comes to us **no matter how untouchable we feel.**

We, as the body of Christ, are called to extend our hands to others, even as we have to take precautions in contagious situations. Jesus could touch the leper because of the unique human he is. The man with leprosy was still dangerous to the people of his community, so they could not touch him in the same way that Jesus could. Yet, they still could have treated him with compassion. That is what we can do for anyone in challenging situations, see their humanity, acknowledge their worth.

When Jesus healed the man with leprosy, he did something more. He gave this man who looked like "living death" new life. He restored the man to wholeness and allowed him to rejoin his community. So, his physical healing was more a means to an end. Through this act, he was given new life. We too through Jesus' figurative touch are given new life in the midst of the hopelessness we may feel.

And it's important to acknowledge God's healing in this way, restoration, wholeness. We hear Jesus tell the man with leprosy, "I do choose" to heal you. What about when God doesn't seem to choose that or chooses something else. We pray, and we don't get the outcome we want. Many people will say, "God answered my prayer" when they get the answer they want or at least the one they can perceive or understand. Does that mean that their prayers were in vain, or God does not care about their pain? By no means.

I keep coming back to the book of Daniel, in the Older Testament, and the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were offered the choice of worshipping the golden statue of Nebuchadnezzar or be thrown in the fiery furnace. They refused to bow, and they said about their punishment, "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." (Daniel 3:14-18)

I'm brought to the idea that we have to expand our idea of healing to include the way that we, in our bodies, minds, and spirits, are able to deal with our various limits. We can do it in a compassionate way for ourselves and others, or not. (Marcia McFee, "Sermon Fodder," *Holy Vessels*, 2021). The way of compassion leads to new life in the midst of hopelessness.

With all of this we can empathize with the leper in even a greater way now than we could have a year ago. We feel so separated, isolated. But then there is the exclusion he experienced. Remembering what we talked about earlier, the times we weren't included or specifically excluded. Groups, clubs, organizations may have criteria for membership or participation. You may be familiar with Groucho Marx's famous quote, "I don't want to belong to any club that will accept people like me as a member."

I've been excluded from many groups and clubs, made to feel unwelcome and unwanted, but that's not the way it's supposed to be at church. (Not that it always works that way.) There are people who think they won't be welcome for a whole long list of reasons. People who jokingly claim that the church building would fall in on them if they walked through the door. Many of these people have been hurt by the church both intentionally (which is horrible) or unintentionally because what we (as the church) said or did made them feel unwelcome or unsafe.

As a part of the Body of Christ, the church universal, we each have to consider what we as individuals are doing. What could you do to bridge that gap with people? But then, also look ourselves as Joseph United Methodist Church in what we are doing as a group to make people feel safe in our presence. How are we reaching across the gap?

Consider, what kind of hope and healing do you come to religion, to God, to church (as our community of faith) seeking? We are treasured by God. We are beautiful. We belong. How can we help people feel this deeply, to their bones?

This is what we will continue to consider in our role as Holy Vessels in the weeks to come.

Amen!