

# *Community Healing*

Sermon on the 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

Wendy D. Cliff

St. Stephen's Belvedere

June 28, 2015

[2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27](#)

[Psalm 130](#)

[Mark 5:21-43](#)

Healing. Our Summer Sundays theme for today is healing because the gospel tells us not one, but two stories of healing. And because of that, our healing ministers will be offering anointing and healing prayer after this service [and Capucine will be leading a restorative chair yoga session at coffee hour]. I appreciate that this is the theme for my first sermon here at St. Stephen's. It seems fitting with my core responsibilities for pastoral care and outreach. But more than that, I am glad healing is our theme today because we have much to celebrate in our country this week with regards to healing: not only did the Supreme Court on Friday recognize the rights of our LGBT brothers and sisters to marry, but yesterday the national Episcopal Church elected its first African American man, Michael Curry, to succeed its first female Presiding Bishop. These are healing times! This past Wednesday, in her opening remarks at the General Convention for the Episcopal Church, our current Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, said that our church's "prime directive is: love God, love neighbor, work to heal the world."<sup>1</sup> So, let's spend some time this morning looking at healing.

As someone who has grieved and been broken many times, and also after serving hundreds of hours as an interfaith chaplain in hospital ICUs, oncology, and pediatric wards, I believe healing, at its core, is about restoring relationships. When something goes wrong we become alienated from one of three things: our bodies, our community, or God. Sometimes it's one of those things; sometimes it's all three.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/78th-general-convention-episcopal-church-opening-remarks-presiding-bishop>; accessed 6/25/15

When our bodies get sick, we feel betrayed by our bodies. They're not working the way we want them to work – our joints ache, our bones break, our immune systems go haywire, or our cells mutate and create cancer. Our relationship with our body becomes fractured.

And these bodily illnesses can also lead to isolation. When we go to the hospital, our world shrinks to the area around our hospital bed. If we have to move into assisted living, or across country to live closer to children who can care for us for a week or month or sometimes longer, we're no longer actively engaged with the people who helped define us at work, or play, or church, or home. Physical illness isn't the only cause of social isolation or alienation. Arguments, betrayals, divorce, job losses, and deaths can separate us from the family and friends we relied upon and who helped us find meaning and purpose.

Finally, illness or hard times can cause us to feel that God is not present, a feeling of wandering in the desert with no comfort and assurance or hope. Our prayers seem unanswered. Or, we get mad at God: how could a loving God let a child get cancer or my friend get raped? This anger and resentment makes us push God away and sever our relationship.

So, I've been at St. Stephen's now for less than two weeks and I've been watching for signs of healing. I'm excited to report that the list is long! First of all, Dorothy Jones and Zoila Schoenberg told me all about the healing ministry team that Shari started; the beautiful group that prays on a regular basis for those in need, leads semi-annual services of healing, and like today, offers anointing and healing prayer after worship. Janice Dalzell-Piper and Cindy Brown told me all about the Soul Food and Eldercare ministries – compassionate actions of prayer, food delivery, driving, and companionship. I met the group of women who gather every other week to knit scarves for people in need and little knitted birds' nests for our winged friends who've lost their homes. The garden in the back of the church, part of Earth and Altar, has produced this season's first two crops of pole beans which are being donated to Ritter House and used for the this month's Westminster hot lunch, providing homeless people with much needed fresh vegetables which we know lead to healthier bodies. Many, many of you are involved in getting Camp Create geared up, with its primary mission to heal division caused by race and economics. Outside in the courtyard, there are also signs of healing. First, the flowing waters of the fountain, reminding us of baptism and the restorative, unifying power of water. And then there's the memorial garden where I

know that just on the other side of that wall, special, much loved members of our church are still worshipping with us. That's healing. And it's not only the adults who practice healing here. We just sent off 5 youth and 3 adults to Taos to build a house for those without adequate shelter, a healing presence with a community in need. And our Children's Minister, Marie Cavanaugh, has created a beautiful opening water ritual for the Summer Sundays Sunday school, giving children the opportunity to offer their prayers for healing, too. I'm sure, in the weeks ahead, I will discover even more ways St. Stephen's participates in ministries of healing.

But the central act this community engages in for healing is the weekly Eucharist. When we gather together to hear the gospel and to share the bread and the wine, we are gathering as a sign of unity. From the moment we enter this building, we are a sign of healing, of restoring relationship between body, community, and God. This central act of the gathered community is where today's scripture readings come in.

First we have the lesson from Samuel that tells of the deaths of King Saul and his son Jonathan. David served under Saul and although their relationship was troubled at times, David honored and respected Saul as the king anointed by God. And Jonathan was David's closest friend, sharing a love deeper than any he'd ever experienced. David is deeply mourning their deaths. But this passage also shows us what David does: he writes a song of lament and orders that the community sing it together. Have you ever thought about the fact that when we sing together, we are actually breathing together, taking in and expelling breath at the same time – more so than when we speak in unison. By singing together, David was helping his community heal, not only with words, but with the action of singing that bound their bodies together and helped to heal their aching hearts.

Now the gospel lesson overtly talks about healing, but I don't think it's quite what it appears at first. As I spent more time with it, I began to shift my attention away from the main action and notice something else. When we read scripture, it's tempting to only identify with Jesus, or the named characters, or even the central figures in a story when they aren't named like the woman and girl today. But if we look around the scenes in today's stories more carefully, we start to notice another central character. The crowd. The word "crowd" is actually used 5 times in this passage, plus we have another group causing a commotion with their weeping and wailing. So what role does the crowd actually play in these stories?

Well, in the story about the woman with the hemorrhage, at first the crowd seems like an impediment to her getting to Jesus. We envision her pushing her way through dozens of sweaty bodies so she could just touch a corner of Jesus' cloak. But it doesn't actually say that. It only says she came up behind Jesus in the crowd. What if the crowd was there to help the woman get to Jesus? What if they weren't shunning her, which we would expect in a culture that ostracized people who were considered unclean due to bleeding, not to mention being a single woman. The fact that the crowd hadn't pushed her away is actually an indication to me that maybe it was the crowd who helped her reach out to Jesus.

We should also notice that Jesus is never alone when he heals these two people. The gospel writer goes out of his way to make clear that other people are present at these healings. Jesus heals the woman in the midst of the crowd, and he heals the girl surrounded by his closest disciples and her parents. And remember, as is typical in Mark's gospel, Jesus says to the girl's family and his disciples, "don't tell anyone about this." So those present at the healings are not there to provide proof or testimony of Jesus' powers. No, I think the crowd and the family are present at the healings because they are necessary to those healings.

You see, when Jesus said, "your faith has made you well," I don't believe he was speaking just to the woman. And when Jesus said, "do not fear, only believe," I don't think he was speaking just to the synagogue leader. He was speaking to everyone present. The faith of everyone combined helped Jesus heal the woman and girl.

Jesus reminds us today that healing happens in community. It's why our healing ministers work in pairs. They can't do it alone. It's why baptisms are part of Sunday eucharists, versus when I was a child when they were done privately. It's why the central sacrament of our healing, the Eucharist, can never be celebrated alone by a priest – there always has to be at least one other person present. And, it's why we visit the sick, because they can't be Christians all by themselves.

Communities heal. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we heal people in this community and through this community in so many ways. And so today, in this crowd, drink deeply of the healing in this place. Sing with abandon. Really savor the bread and the wine. If you've never availed yourself to healing prayer; give it a try; don't be afraid. And let's continue praying, dreaming, and having meaningful conversations about how we will extend our ministry of healing bodies, reconciling relationships, and renewing our ties to God. Let's keep inviting new people, especially

those broken and hurting, into our midst to share our faith, our stories, the bread and wine, and the healing power of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*