



SUNDAY SERMON

Healing Presence

DATE

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PREACHER

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Friends — you may not know this about me, but I don't do well with sickness. I guess most people don't enjoy being sick, but I think I'm worse than usual at dealing with little aches and pains. A cold makes me miserable. A headache gets me depressed. Persistent symptoms will send me to google trying to put together a diagnosis that takes into account a random muscle tremor and a skin rash. And googling symptoms is never helpful as almost anything could indicate something serious, some incurable disease, and then I'm counting the months I have left and making plans for my funeral. I'm kind of a hypochondriac.

So when I read about the woman in the Gospel this morning, who had been crippled for eighteen years, bent over and unable to stand up straight, I really felt for her. Can you imagine carrying such a weight around for so long, waking up every day for eighteen years with the same pain, the same limitations, the same struggle? Actually, I'm sure some of you can imagine that, that you have dealt with or are dealing with long term health challenges.

I think back to a couple of health issues I've had, things that lasted a few days and involved pretty serious pain — and what I remember most is how desperate and distracting the pain was, how it grew to be the only thing I could think about, my only reality. Aside from the trouble this kind of sickness brings to the body, even worse is the way it robs your presence of mind. I admire anyone who can continue to live through such a struggle, not just for days, but for weeks, months, years.

This is the kind of person Jesus faces in today's Gospel. When the afflicted woman arrives at the synagogue where Jesus is teaching, he sees her immediately; he notices her pain. He knows her struggle. And he reaches out, lays hands on her, and sets her free from the bondage of sickness that she was trapped in for so long.

Jesus was known as a healer — it's one of his main identities in the Gospels. People came from all over to seek him out because they heard that he had healing powers. The crowds were drawn in by the healing, and then some of them stuck around for the teaching. But he was a healer first.

These so-called "miracle" healings can put some distance between us and Jesus, since miracles aren't really a part of our everyday reality. Our reality is post-enlightenment science and medicine and googling symptoms on the internet. But try to put yourself into the first-century reality of the Jewish peasant: it's not like their choice was between crazy faith-healer Jesus and the regular doctor. There weren't any doctors. But there were other folk-healers. Jesus became famous because he was a particularly good, a particularly effective folk-healer.

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What set Jesus apart from the other folk healers? What made him so good? I think it must have been the way he mediated God's presence. To come in contact with Jesus was to be in the presence of God — he acted as a direct conduit between heaven and earth.

In one of his famous healings, he opens a deaf man's ears by looking up to the heavens and speaking the Aramaic word ephphatha, which means, "be opened." He didn't mean that the man's ears should be opened; he meant that the heavens should be opened, and God's healing power flow down.

I imagine Jesus' presence like the final chord of a symphony, the thing we return to at the end that restores order; the calm after the storm; the pure smell of the morning by the sea when the world is fresh and new. Jesus' presence cuts through all the madness, all the chaos and disorder of the world around us, and restores us to our right minds. Breathe him in and presence of mind is restored. Jesus connects us directly to God's love which is our source, and our ending.

And it's just this presence of mind that allows us to know the truth: that God's love is enough! Enough for us; enough for everyone. Enough to be generous with, enough to share with others. We don't need to hoard God's love. I would say that's the problem afflicting the leaders of the synagogue, the ones who get angry with Jesus for breaking the rules and healing on the Sabbath.

These leaders derive their power from ... trying to control God's love, doling it out bit by bit, keeping access to God's power limited. But Jesus sees through all that: he knows that God's love is too big to be controlled. The only thing we can do is try to accept it; try to receive God's love, and let it flow through us.

These synagogue leaders want to build a wall around God, to keep us here and God over there. Over there, God is pure and untouchable. Over here, we are selfish and unclean. But this is a false barrier: because nothing can separate us from God's love. That's not to say that our behavior doesn't sometimes need correcting: it's just that nothing we do is going to stop God from seeking us and finding us and helping us out of the mess we've made. Nothing we can do can keep God out.

What kind of false barriers do you put up around God? Maybe you think that God only wants perfection; that God only wants you if you are good. But I'm here to tell you that what God really wants is just you: the authentic, real you. And if you show up and hang out with God enough, don't worry; God will make you good eventually.

God needs you — God needs all of us — to join in the healing of the world that we live in. It's frustrating, I know, because the world is still broken. Kids are still sick. People still die of unexplainable, incurable diseases, people who deserve to live. And then we hear a Gospel story where Jesus just shows up, and the healing power flows, we might think: why can't God just fix everything like that? Why can't God fix all the hurts, make it all go away, right now.

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I don't know the answer to that. But in the meantime, while we wait for that miracle, I know that God needs us to help out, to do what we can. I read an essay this week by the writer Anne Lamott, talking about a sick friend who died too soon. Wishing for his healing, she wrote, "I would much prefer that God have a magic wand, and not just a raggedy love army of helpers."

But the raggedy love army of helpers is who God has — in us. We mediate God's love when we sit with people. And pray with them. And bring them a glass of water, or flowers and a get well card, or a meal. All of those things appear very small, insignificant; but they make God's love present. They bring heaven to earth. They help heal the world, reclaiming it for God, an inch at a time. Amen.