October 13th , 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Ordinary Time

10:30 am

For a Faith that Heals

I. What does healing mean?

This morning, we have come upon another text among many that seems to insinuate that being faithful will grant you health. In fact, in this passage, it is in the very last line, “your faith has made you well.” And these healing stories do as much damage as they do good. It’s almost like a buy-in line for the prosperity gospel or for the old Catholic pre-Reformation sense of paying for ‘indulgences’ to the church so you could free yourself of sin.

While, for me, it feels easy to ridicule those notions of the prosperity gospel or indulgences, I would be lying to you if I didn’t wrestle with the text’s claim. As loved ones have died, I’ve asked myself, I’ve asked of God, “Why did this happen? What could I have done differently? Did I not have enough faith? Didn’t I do enough?” There’s this rant of self-blame and shame I’ve dwelt in, in that old Protestant ‘good works’ mentality where I thought if I did enough, it would be ok. Maybe it was my fault, somehow trying to make sense of a death or a loss, I’ve tried to reason it to my own failure.

But let me say, there’s been plenty of times that anger and anguish has gone the other way. When I’ve had friends die by suicide, when I saw a small child lose both her mother and father to heroin overdoses, when I watched a man die before me due to a gun shot wound – I was angry. Profoundly angry at God. God has taken some hard hits from this preacher, where I’ve asked, “If you’re so powerful, how do you let these things happen? Do you not intervene? How could you let this little child be an orphan in the world, how will she ever seen the light of day again? Why, God, why – if you brought all of these wonderful things into the world, how could you let this happen.”

And in truth, whether I’m putting the rant and anger and blame against myself of God, never have I felt that I’ve won either argument. Never have I felt that I figured it out, or made some sense out of those moments. I think they’ve been important – I think we all have our share of arguments with ourselves or with God – and they help us grow into the people we need to be and are called to be. Yet...it hasn’t given me any great answers when I run across these healing Scriptures.

II. To Make Sense

So, I came to this text with a grand amount of hesitancy – that genuine feeling you get when you know this is the word that needs to be preached, but it won’t be fun and it won’t be easy. I dived deeper into the actual text, and what I found out was that the healing part of the lepers, was more of a sideline activity. You see, ten lepers were healed, but only one came back to thank God, to give gratitude, and in fact, that one person was a foreigner, a stranger, the one you would not expect to come back to offer thanks.

When Jesus says, ‘Your faith has made you well” – the word for faith, in Greek, is pistis, which you can find scattered all around the New Testament. It turns out, the word faith from the Gospels to the Epistles and so on has many different nuances that are important to understand the text we come to today. In Hebrews, we hear, ‘faith is the substance of hope’ and ‘the conviction of things not seen.’ In the second letter to the Corinthians, we hear that ‘we walk by faith, not by sight.’

And while we receive all of these wonderful interpretations of what faith means across the New Testament – here’s the sharp reality: it’s still pretty vague. You can’t measure faith, you can’t say that because I’m a preacher, I have more faith that you. I can’t say that the Pope has the most amount faith because of his particular spiritual stature. You can’t put a measuring tape on faith – it is what it is, and what faith means to each of us is going to be completely different, and will probably morph and change and be challenged in new and different ways across the scope of our lives. Imagine the faith of a child, to the faith of teenager, to the faith of young adult, to the faith of an elder – it’s all going to look different. If I were to go down into the fellowship hall after service today and said, “What does faith look like to you” to each person, I would money down that I would get a different interpretation every time.

So, for me, when I read this text – this is how I hear faith – to practice gratitude is to practice faith. To practice gratitude is to practice faith. So when that leper came back, the one of ten, and gave thanks, that was an act of faith. As one of the parts of a faithful life, gratitude will be a part of the picture.

III. Joys and Concerns

Gratitude is an important part of faith, even when we are struggling to believe. Even when we can’t make sense of the world and why people get sick, or die, or are critically injured. That isn’t ours to understand and like I said, arguing with guilt or shame or anger towards yourself or God will help you grow in faith, but perhaps we need to take a lesson from this leper too. Perhaps we need to understand that gratitude is an integral part of faith.

Maybe that’s why I get on your case during our times of sharing our joys and concerns. That’s why you hear me saying, “There has to be a joy.” The fact that we woke up this morning, that we were able to get to this building, we are able to sing, whether off-key or not, that in of itself is a multitude of joys.

I also come to this perspective as someone who has wrestled with depression. When I was going through a time when I couldn’t see anything good anywhere, Lorna forced the ‘Gratitude Jar’ on me about two years ago. And oh boy, I was ticked – but she was right, I needed the jar, I needed the umph to write down something every day that I was thankful for and though I haven’t had to use it in a year or so, I brought it here today. If I’m to pull out some of the gratitude cards, you’ll get some of the most mundane, silly, profound, wonderful comments. I’ll share a few with you, “Thankful for baptizing Penelope”, “Thankful for time to play the piano”, “Thankful for the funny story of our friend Alan using his hair dryer to imagine ‘speed checking’ from his car.” What I recognized during that time was that my joys didn’t have to be deeply profound, they just needed to be recognized.

And when you come to gratitude, as part of faith, the way you interpret healing changes. It doesn’t necessarily make it easier, but it changes. For those examples I had before, when I live in gratitude, I’m able to say, “Though my friend died by suicide, I am so grateful for his life and all that he taught me. I look at the girl who lost both of her parents by drug overdoses, and while my heart breaks, I look with gratitude at the aunts and uncles who came up to her and held her and promised her that she would not have to walk this road alone. When I think about the man who died due to gun violence, I’m of course upset that we have this issue to begin with, but I do with gratitude thank God for the twenty-two years of life he did experience and all that I imagine he brought to his family and friends.” Gratitude does not negate sadness, it does not mean you can’t feel sad or angry – but gratitude as a part of faith, changes the story. It helps us to interpret life as limited humans, the best way we can.

And so I call you to gratitude, today, tomorrow, and from now on. I call upon you to do what you need to do to find gratitude. If you need the jar and some pieces of paper, that’s a great way to start the active process of gratitude. If you need to share your gratitude with friends, that’s a wonderful way to share our humanity together. God has created us and expects us to struggle with faith and with things we cannot measure or understand – but perhaps if we accept that into our hearts, a life filled with gratitude will bring us to new heights and depths in the way we live and love. So, my friends, may your have as many joys as you have concerns, may you thank the God who gives and takes away, and may you find and rejoice in the God who has created us for wonder and wandering. Amen.