

“A Promise of Help and Healing”
Isaiah 57:14-21; Acts 28:23-28;
Matthew 8:1-17

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Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

Today we are talking about God’s gift of help and healing. It’s that idea of help and healing that it so often feels like we need. I certainly know those times in my life when I need both the help and the healing that I think God might be able to offer.

This Sunday, we are looking at Jesus as healer. There’s a certain part of me that struggles to understand what this means. This wasn’t an easy sermon for me to enter into.

Initially, we see Jesus healing different people. He casts out demons, then the Centurion comes, then he goes to the house and heals Peter’s mother-in-law and others begin to come. That center story is a fascinating one, in part because it identifies that faith is involved in the healing—coming to Jesus in faith.

I don’t go through there without noticing something that’s kind of a conundrum: the person who’s coming is not an Israelite, and that somebody other than an Israelite has faith. In many ways the Jewish nation is waiting for a Messiah to throw the Romans out, not to acknowledge that they might have some faith and they might be able to be worth paying attention to. Not only that, it’s not only a Roman coming to Jesus, but it’s a slave that he’s asking to be healed. So Jesus heals a Roman’s slave. The very people that are the problem, and yet Jesus heals. They are ones who didn’t really have much status in society, and yet Jesus heals. So there’s this little conundrum put in there as well.

But the struggle I have is not with Jesus being willing to heal whoever comes to him. We see throughout scripture that it says God is not partial. It’s the very idea of what healing means. I have no problem praying for healing and believing that God works and can heal. And yet I have experience with the very other. You see, when I was about 10, my father came down with leukemia. That first summer there was a remission, and we had a wonderful vacation, but in the next year he ended up back in the hospital. He was a minister. He was praying for his own healing. We were praying for his healing. And yet he died that April. So when I come to this idea of praying for healing, I recognize that it doesn’t always work exactly the way I want it to.

Now there are several things we can do with this. One of the things Isaiah says is that “if they would turn and come to me I would heal their broken hearts and lift up the downtrodden.” So part of the healing that God would do with us is not simply about a physical healing. It’s about a spiritual, and mental, and life healing; a healing of our own brokenness. Certainly that’s a lot about what Jesus came to do, is to heal our brokenness that puts us in right relationship to God.

The other thing I realized is that the healing is not always just personal. There's a healing that goes beyond that. It's a healing of a people, God's people. We live in a time when we're struggling around things that just don't seem right. The #MeToo movement brings up the idea that there's something wrong and we need healing. Black Lives Matter is an issue that shows that there's something wrong and we need a healing. The healing goes way beyond a personal healing. It's a national healing. How do we as people become healed together? I believe it is through the grace of God. We can pray for it and God works in it.

Yet when I've experienced things that don't feel like they've worked, do I begin to let my ears grow dull, my eyes haze over, my heart to become dull until I quit thinking that God might be the answer? I think it's easy to do. Because I believe that there should be causation. I believe that when I pray, something should happen. The world works that way. It doesn't always work that way as much as I want it. It doesn't always do what I ask it to do, but it feels to me like there's real causation in our lives and I want prayer to work just like that. When I ask for something, it happens. But then I can take a step back and say, "What am I saying? I think God should do exactly what I tell God to do?" When I begin to recognize that, then I realize that maybe there's some room for God's discernment.

I'm not the only one who has experienced disappointments. Look at Paul. In 2 Corinthians 2 he says, "I have a thorn in my flesh and God won't get rid of it." It's clear that God doesn't always do exactly what we ask, not even for somebody as special as Paul. Paul goes on to say, "I think he does that to keep me humble." Some of us sometimes think, reading Paul, that that was a good thing.

It's not always clear exactly how things should happen. This world is incredibly complex. So when I pray into the loving ear of God, when I recognize that God's heart is open to what I say, there is some way in which God is saying, "Yes, what you say to me matters." I believe God changes the world. Sometimes I feel like I've seen miraculous healing, but not every time.

There is a story about a guy who was a faith healer. He had three people he prayed for. Two of them got well. The third one died. The faith healer died then, and when he got to heaven he said, "God, I prayed for all three. Why did one of them die? You didn't heal him." God says, "Who said I didn't heal him?"

What I have to realize is that my healing, what I want, is not always the healing that is needed. That's why we often end with something like "God's will be done," because it's true. As much as I may want something, especially for somebody or myself or my nation, I have to listen and see how God might be doing that, how God might be leading me into that healing, what responsibility I have, what God is inviting me to be part of and to be actively doing my part.

I believe our prayers change the nature of our world—just like our actions change the nature of our world—and that praying for healing brings healing. I'm just not sure I

always see exactly what that healing is. That's a hard thing to say because I live so much in a domino world where I want to be able to see exactly what happens. And yet it is by the grace of God that I can come, that we can come, to a God who hears and listens and invites us to be God's people, that invites us to know that through our relationship with God, through our prayers, through our contrite hearts we enter into God's kingdom. We enter into a goodness of life and of life everlasting.

The incredible thing is that people were waiting for themselves to get perfect so that the Messiah would come. You know what happened? Christ came when people weren't perfect and instead invited them simply to begin to trust that God would guide them, God would heal them, God would teach them, God would forgive them and give them life.

So we have two sacraments. Baptism, where we recognize our own struggle and need and enter into the grace of God; and Communion, where we come and recognize that it is God who sustains us and who continually gives us life, not only in moments when we ask for healing, but as we recognize the blessings of God in the rest of our lives as well.

We can come to a God who sustains and heals and leads us into the goodness of life, and life everlasting. There are two things I think we can remember around the table. One is that we have a God who sustains us, who wants us to be whole and healthy human beings, and two, that God wants to create of us a community, a family of faith to help us recognize we are all people of God and that healing takes place in that community through God's grace.

So I can't always see exactly what God is doing, but I know that as we come to God through the love of Christ and the grace God has given us, God is at work. God brings healing. God brings us direction. God brings us into a relationship that gives us life. Amen.