

## **“God’s Dream Of Healing”**

### Sermon Preface

I have always loved Toronto for the art galleries and museums. We have the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), and just outside of the city, the McMichael Art Gallery. Each year I purchase a membership to one of these galleries. Last year it was the ROM and this year it is the AGO and McMichael’s.

A couple of weeks ago I visited the AGO again. I will generally spend most of my time while there on the second floor where most of the Canadian art is on display but I will always begin on the main floor and in the European Gallery. I go there specifically to view a painting by the Flemish painter Artus Wolffort (1581-1641) titled “Christ at the Pools of Bethesda”.

This painting tells a story of Christ healing a disabled man but for me it also describes a deeper truth. In it one can live the story described in John 5:2-9 where a pool which, when stirred by an angel, was able to heal the first person who entered. There was a man there who had sat by this pool for thirty-eight years (38), never able to enter the pool fast enough after the water was stirred.

Jesus approaches the man and asks him, “Do you want to get well?” To which he replies,

“Sir, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

His answer has always struck me – he did not answer the question. I wonder if there are times when we do the same. When Jesus asks us, “Do you want to be well?” how do we answer?

The image that comes to mind for me is of us holding onto a pillar near the pool of Bethesda while Jesus tries to drag toward the healing it offers – all the while we are saying, “Yes, I want to be healed. Yes, I want to be healed”.

This is a sermon about healing. It is about God’s dream of healing, for us and for all creation. And it is about God’s invitation for us to join him in this mission. (theme)

### Page 1 – Trouble in the Bible – *The Unfolding Healing Message of Jesus*

Jesus and the disciples are in Capernaum, just beginning Jesus’ public ministry. Capernaum was a small fishing village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, approximately two miles west of the Jordan River. It is an interesting location in that it was in Capernaum where Jesus did much of his public ministry while in Galilee, and yet it is also the village he cursed because of their failure to accept and live out his message (see Matthew 11:23).

To give some context to this passage; Jesus has been baptized by John the Baptist and the Spirit has descended on him. Then Jesus goes to the desert for 40 days and is tempted by the devil. After this his public ministry begins.

A few verses prior to our text for today we learn that it was the Sabbath and that Jesus was initially in the synagogue teaching. While in the synagogue he is approached by a man possessed by an evil spirit who of

course recognizes Jesus, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” (v.24). Jesus heals this man.

Here we pick up our gospel text where Jesus leaves the synagogue and goes with his disciples to Simon’s mother-in-law’s home who is in bed with a fever. Jesus heals her as well.

After Jesus’ healing in the synagogue the Jews of the area must have been telling each other about Jesus, as it says in verse 33, “The whole town gathered at the door” of Simon’s mother-in-law – all searching for healing.

Here we begin to see the difficulties of the people of Jesus’ time: they were broken, wounded, in pain – and searching for healing.

### Sermon - page 2 – Trouble in the World – *We are all in need of God’s healing*

We can assume, in faith, that whatever Jesus said to his disciples is a revelation of what God is saying to us today. Whatever Jesus did for his disciples is a revelation of what God is doing for us today. Whatever Jesus asked his disciples to do for one another is what God is asking us to do for each other.

So if we look at the woundedness and healing that is portrayed in this text, how does it connect with the woundedness and healing that we are offered today?

Here is what we see all around us:

- War seems ever present,
- Poverty touches the lives of millions both abroad and close to home,
- Sickness touches all of us, even those who seem to do everything right,
- Our marriages crumble, our relationships sour, there is depression and deep loneliness in so many...

We are tempted to cry out: “What are you waiting for Lord - when will you come to dry our tears?!?”

I have been working in a hospital as part of my CPE education (as part of my formation process). I am on the palliative care ward. I have been surrounded by suffering people. Often I will go to meet with a patient one day to speak with the patient and their loved ones and return the next day to find that the patient had died – sometimes still in bed and still surrounded by grieving loved ones...and I am asked to go in and somehow provide comfort

The hard edge of suffering, woundedness, and grief are close at hand in the hospital.

It would be good for us to remember that there will come a time when the people that we live with will not be here anymore – life is a temporary arrangement.

If Simon’s mother-in-law lived close by that hospital or nearby Zion Lutheran Church and Jesus showed up I do not think a home or a street or a neighbourhood could contain all those who would show up in search of healing. Yes, there is a parallel with our woundedness and the woundedness of those in Jesus’ time.

But the question is, where is the hope in this message?

Meister Eckhart says, “What is the joy that death does not have the power to destroy and how might I discover it?”

Are we just waiting for miraculous healing or there some deeper message we are asked to see in this text?

Sermon - page 3 – Grace in the bible – *The Free Gift of Grace*

Is there a deeper meaning

- A. Well, let's go back to the text:
  - 1. First Jesus rids a man of an evil spirit in the synagogue
  - 2. Then he heals a woman of a fever
  - 3. Next he heals all Jewish comers at the house of Simon's mother-in-law, and
  - 4. Later, we see in chapter 5 of Mark that Jesus heals the Gentile demon-possessed man in the region of the Gerasenes – a Gentile region.

What we are seeing is a gradually unfolding vision of Jesus' message of healing – a man, then a woman, then the Jews, and then the Gentiles – until all are included in the healing message of God.

Interesting: among the Jews Jesus would not let the people he healed (1:44), his disciples (8:30), or demons (1:34) tell others about him, but we see in Chapter 5 that the Gentile demon-possessed man is told to go tell everyone (5:19). Perhaps this is an indication of the baggage the Jewish people were holding onto about who the Messiah really was, not so with the Gentiles (some insight into the Messianic Secret).

Wherever he found human pain Jesus went toward it, he touched it, he healed it – even with, and perhaps especially with, the marginalized (the poor, the prostitute, the beggar, the demon possessed).

But there seems a broader message here as well; about the nature of God's healing?

- A. The healing of Simon's mother-in-law is actually described in the original Greek as her being *raised up*. This same terminology is also used to describe Lazarus being *raised up* from the dead (John 12) and then also to describe the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 3:15, 4:10, 5:30; Romans 10:9 and 1 Thessalonians 1:10). Remember the two men, whose "clothes gleamed like lightning" who claimed, "He is not here, he is risen [*raised up*]" (Luke 24:6).  
In this way Simon's mother-in-law being *raised up* at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry already looks ahead to the resurrection of Jesus and the free gift of healing that would become available for all people through the blood of Christ.

Sermon - page 4 – Grace in the World – *Jesus asks us to be his hands and feet*

From this perspective, healing is already ours as a free gift, given to us as grace and faith, each in the measure that is required – and paid for by the blood of Christ

...and it's free; we are simply invited to participate in fulfilling God's dream for us and the world.

The theologian Richard Rohr remarks:

*Life is living itself within us, even in spite of us. We are simply invited to join the dance with our intention and desire, to allow grace to flourish all the more freely and abundantly.*

I know what you may be thinking: "but this is not healing as the world sees healing, I am still in a lot of pain and see suffering all around me", and within myself.

How are we healed in the midst of the suffering of the world?

Perhaps our suffering, our woundedness, our pain help to create a vulnerability, an aching empathy, a profound desire to show kindness, and to love others – and a realization that Christ walks with us through our darkest night and identifies himself most deeply with us from the depths of our dilemma.

In our suffering Christ also suffers, as he did on the cross

in our tears, Christ cries,

in our deepest poverty, in the barrenness of our deepest heart, Christ is a Christ of burnt people – and joins us through every trial

and through grace we are taught to rely absolutely and wholly on a God who loves us.

Here is where hope lives (Vaclav Havel)

“Hope is not like optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well (because it does not always turn out well) but rather is the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out.”

- Someday (or already) our parents will get sick and they will die. It hurts like heck but it makes sense because we have a view of life that is greater than and beyond the world of the changing.
- Someday we will get old, get sick, and die...but it makes sense because of our faith in the kingdom which is yet to come.
- Someday our children will get old, get sick, and will die...but it makes sense because the kingdom yet to come.

A few years ago now a family friend got sick with cancer and was near death. I went to visit him one day in the hospital and found him alone in his hospital bed, breathing with difficulty but awake and lucid. As we began speaking together I was struck by how his thoughts were not on his sickness but rather on his compassion and love for others. He lamented those who could not accept God's free gift of grace, and whose lives were being needlessly altered by anger, bitterness, and hopelessness. He kept going back to God's promise – “It is free, it is free” he kept saying, with tears in his eyes.

He had cancer and was near death (in fact he died only a few days later) but he was also in fact fully healed...

...with a freedom from suffering in the midst of suffering, a freedom from death in the midst of death – he was free, he was healed, and full of the love and hope (and healing) that God dreams of for each one of us in this world and the next.

Ultimately, Christ's promise of healing assures us that he will never leave us to face the perils of this world alone – we are never alone, ever! God is here and present with each one of us, right now even. He joins our struggles, he weeps our sadness, and he cradles us in a healing embrace when the world's challenges seem

overwhelming.

God's vision of healing also connects us with our communities: it empowers us to participate in each other's healing; to be the hands and feet of God. This is a foundational assurance but also a challenge...

We are perhaps not asked to lay hands on the sick to cure their ailments outright (although some may be) but we *are* empowered to display the simple acts of kindness and love that bring God's dream of healing into the world:

- A kind word for a stranger who is down on his/her luck,
- A quiet "thank you" for the person who works tirelessly behind the scenes,
- A listening ear for someone who is lonely or struggling right here in our own communities - just as Jesus did in his

In fact:

Any time we reach out with a kind word or deed to someone who is in distress, God is bringing his kingdom into the world.

Any time we attempt to ease the discomfort of the disregarded, Jesus is bringing us into union with his will. Any time we help feed the hungry, support the poor, care for the lonely, comfort the sick, or stand with each other through difficult times the Kingdom of God is at hand and we are aligning ourselves with God's dream of healing for all his children.

In this way we join God's mission of healing and hope as an affirmation of our own walk toward true healing – saying "yes Lord, heal me" from the edge of the swirling pool of Bethesda – **we let go the pillar.**

Conclusion

I discovered a few weeks ago when I visited the AGO that the painting of *Christ at the pool of Bethesda* no longer hangs in its usual position. It must have been rotated out for the time being.

The message of this healing remains clear however. It is a message that speaks to the heart of God's divine intention to heal all his children and the world. The message is this:

- God loves us
- God will never leave us
- God promises unconditionally a gift of grace which invites us to participate in his mission of healing and love.

Stated at its most basic level, God's dream of healing is a dream which says to your heart: "I love you".

Amen