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Rev. Dr. Carlan Helgeson

**“HOPE FOR HEALING”**

Mark 8: 22-26

 Anybody here today need healing? I don’t know about you, but the older I get, the more people I know who need healing. We’ve got children and grandchildren, friends and neighbors, siblings and parents who need healing. Look at the prayer list in our Sunday bulletin, and you’ll see how many people need healing just in our church!

 But is healing for real, does healing really happen today? Do miracles happen anymore? I know a lot of people, even some theologians, who say that the “age of miracles” is past—that if it ever existed, it belonged to Jesus’ day, and that all these reports about people growing new limbs and being healed of HIV and Alzheimer’s are nothing but a bunch of hooey. What are we to make of it?

 Ernest Angley was a rather flamboyant and well-known TV evangelist for 60 years in Northeast Ohio. Maybe you chanced upon his program when channel surfing in the past. This was the invitation that the faith healer issued on his ministry website: “Do you need a miracle or healing? You can have a miracle; you can have a healing today. Untold multitudes have been healed as they put their hand against mine on the screen…” The website went on to promise that healing could also come if you “agree with Reverend Angley as he prays this prayer for you: ‘Lord, I bring the sick and afflicted to you today: the cancer victims, the heart patients, those with diabetes and all manner of sicknesses and diseases, the little ones that are afflicted. Heal in the holy, all-powerful name of Jesus! And we know, Jesus, with your blood stripes they’re being healed right now. Heal! Heal, I pray! Amen and amen.’”

 Have you ever seen such faith healers at work? What are we to think of such things?

 Some people don’t have a very positive view about all of this. A woman was listening to a Christian radio program and called in to say, “Pastor, I was born blind, and I’ve been blind all my life. I don’t mind so much being blind, but I have some well-meaning friends who tell me that if I had more faith, I could be healed.”

 The radio pastor asked her, “Tell me, do you carry one of those white canes?”

 “Yes, I do,” she replied.

 He said, “Then the next time someone tells you that, hit him or her on the head with your cane and say, ‘If you had more faith, that wouldn’t hurt!’”

 Isn’t that the way some of us feel about it, too? Whether real or not, I, for one, get really angry when faith healers put people down for a lack of faith. Those poor people come looking for help. They are already beaten down in spirit, many of them feeling that God doesn’t love them. Then these supposed emissaries of God tell them that their diseases are the result of their own lack of faith! What do you think it does to a person to be told, “You’re responsible for your own illness. If you believed more, you wouldn’t be sick!”? After those words such people are not only sick in body, they are sick in spirit, too. And all this because the faith healer doesn’t want to appear unable to heal someone, doesn’t want to own up to the truth that they can’t always deliver what they promise.

 Forgive my little aside there. Back to the question: Do miracles happen anymore? Is there any hope for healing these days?

 In spite of what you may think right now, I do believe in healing miracles. Yes, we do have hope for healing. But if we’re in search of healing, we need to go to the right person. We need to find the one who has the credentials to do what he promises.

 A woman got a phone call that her little daughter was sick and needed some medicine. She left work and stopped by a pharmacy to get the prescription, but when she returned to her car, she found that she had locked her keys inside. She called a friend and asked what she should do. He told her to find a coat hanger and try that. The woman looked around and, lo and behold, right in front of her was an old rusty hanger that had been left on the ground, probably by somebody else in the same situation. She looked at the hanger and said to herself, “I don’t know how to use this.” So she bowed her head and asked God to send her some help.

 Within five minutes a beat-up old motorcycle pulled up and seated on it was a bearded guy wearing a biker skull rag on his head. The man got off his bike and asked if her could help.

 “Oh, yes,” said the woman gratefully. “My daughter is sick, and I stopped to get some medicine and locked my keys in the car. Can you use this hanger to unlock my car?”

 “Sure,” said the guy. He walked over to the car and in less than a minute had it open. The woman hugged him and said, “Oh, thank you so much! You are a very nice man!”

 “Lady,” the guy replied, “I am not a nice man. I just got out of prison yesterday for car theft.”

 The woman hugged him again and cried out toward heaven, “Oh, thank you, Lord. You even sent me a professional!”

 Who is the professional when it comes to healing? Who has the background and experience, the credentials to help? Who has the expertise to heal us? Only God! God is the One who created us, designed our nature and our structure, both our visible and invisible being. Science continually reveals what marvelous creations our human minds and bodies are! Yet God knows us in ways we don’t know ourselves. As much progress as researchers have made in understanding our brain and our genome, they are still baffled about many things. But the God who created our DNA, who predisposed our evolution into the magnificent creatures that we are today—that God is the expert on healing.

 Jesus came, claiming to be sent from God. Those who knew him best called him, Savior, Holy One, and Son of God because Jesus made God’s power and purpose known in a way that no one else had ever done. If we want to know who God is and what God does, we look to Jesus.

 When it comes to miracles and healings, Jesus reportedly did a lot of them; and when we take a closer look, we realize that Jesus’ way of healing was different than the way many faith healers go about it today. Many may claim to have healing power, but God is the only Healer we have, and God still heals people today.

 In our Gospel lesson for today, we read about one of the healings Jesus did. We learn from Jesus how God heals.

 God heals in response to genuine need.

 One time years ago boxing champ, Evander Holyfield, went to a Benny Hinn Crusade and was supposedly healed of a heart defect. Later on it was discovered that the cardiologist had misdiagnosed the problem and there had not been anything wrong with his heart to begin with—just too much morphine in his system after a fight. Those who study miraculous healings from a scientific viewpoint often find that the supposed pre-existing conditions that form the basis of miraculous healings often did not exist or were misdiagnosed. And it’s not uncommon for people who get caught up in the excitement of a healing crusade to feel better temporarily from the psychological euphoria.

 But God’s healing is genuine. God doesn’t heal people from things that they don’t have wrong with them.

 In our text Jesus and his followers arrive in the fishing village of Bethsaida on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Mark writes simply this about the situation: **Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him.**

 In that culture people believed that holy people sent from God had the power of God resident within their bodies. They were like charged batteries, and those whom they touched would receive some of that power for healing.

 Jesus was, indeed, the right one to seek out for healing because Jesus is God-come-to-us, Emmanuel. What’s more, Jesus shows the compassion of God. God does not turn away those who are in need.

 Matthew records an incident about Jesus passing through Jericho when two blind men, sitting along the road, cry out for mercy. When Jesus stops his entourage and asks what they want, they cry, **“Lord, let our eyes be opened.”** Matthew writes, **“Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes.”**

 Moved with compassion! That’s God’s nature. The world is full of people who want your vote, want your money, want your soul—that’s why they do what they do for you. But God acts from a different motivation. God really cares about you. God has compassion on you.

 When the blind man comes to Jesus, the Lord doesn’t berate him and tell him, “If you had more faith, you wouldn’t be blind.” That’s the way other people felt—that illness was a just punishment from God for some sin. Have you ever felt that way yourself? Shake loose from that idea! Jesus taught us that God doesn’t bring the evil of our lives. God’s way is love. God welcomes us—all of us. God is always looking for ways to help and heal the broken world and meet the true needs of creation. God heals in response to genuine need.

 Jesus shows us the difference between the way many faith healers treat people and the way God heals. God heals without making a spectacle of it.

 I gave up watching “Christian broadcasting” a long time ago because what I saw on those channels didn’t mesh with my understanding of the Gospel. I just couldn’t envision Jesus parading around with a towel on his neck to catch sweat while screaming and pointing fingers at people and knocking them over like some flamboyant TV evangelists do.

 An eviction order was issued against a Christian family living in an apartment tower in Berlin, Germany, because of their noisy prayer sessions. Apparently, the family’s prayers would begin as late as 2 a.m. with loud screams and singing. In an interview with the German newspaper, *Das Bild*, the father said, “I really don’t want to disturb the neighbors, but the high volume is needed in the battle against the devil.”

 Do we have to scream to get God’s power to come down? I don’t ever remember Jesus screaming while he was driving out demons. It was always the demons who were screaming and shrieking! Loud doesn’t equal better. God is not deaf.

 Jesus didn’t go in much for making a spectacle of himself or others. As a matter of fact, in the text at hand, Mark writes that Jesus **took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Can you see anything?”**

 I’m waiting for the day when a faith healer whispers into an ill person’s ear and then sees him become whole again!

 You see, Jesus didn’t want to make a scene with his healing, and he didn’t want people to become sideshows in a circus. Remember when Jesus was called in to heal Jairus’ daughter. Everybody was outside, weeping and wailing, when the Lord arrived. What did Jesus do? Did he bring the dead girl out and perform his show like some act in Vegas? Of course not! Jesus took three disciples and the parents into the house and shut the door. Only five people saw Jesus raise the dead child.

 Another thing Jesus didn’t do in our text was to play mental games with the blind man. He didn’t tell him, “Now don’t doubt or you’ll lose your healing!” Jesus didn’t say, “You might not feel any different right now, but you are healed, even if you don’t know it.” Jesus didn’t dish out any of this double-talking babble. He wanted to know if his touch had made any difference. Jesus wasn’t afraid of finding out the results. He didn’t hide behind a self-centered need to uphold a reputation. He wanted the truth. **“Can you see anything** or not?”

 I don’t know about you, but that is so refreshing! Today we will offer a quiet way to come to the communion rail to receive a laying on of hands and prayer—not to make a splash, but to take advantage of the ever-present grace and power of God. God does not want to embarrass us. God heals without great fanfare.

 Think of it this way, dear church family: Every healing is God’s healing, isn’t it? Even though the healing may be attributed to medicine or surgery, it is the body that has to respond to the means. If the body doesn’t respond, then no amount of chemotherapy or radiation, no surgery or dialysis or treatment will help. And if it’s ultimately up to the body, then it goes back to the One who created the body, the One who designed the DNA in the body—it goes back to God.

 God has healed me of more diseases and ailments than I can ever recall—from broken bones and infections to kidney stones and gallstones, ulcers and hernias, Covid and shingles. Through the years I have had cuts and bruises, colds and coughs, allergies and poison ivy, infections and headaches more than I can count. God healed them all, so quietly and matter-of-factly that I hardly noticed. God is not a showman. God heals without making a spectacle of us.

 God sometimes heals gradually and not all at once.

 In this amazing lesson from Mark’s Gospel we find that Jesus’ healing method—putting his saliva on the man’s eyes, a method that culture considered potent if done by a holy man—wasn’t 100% effective! The healing wasn’t complete! Gasp!

 Mark tells us that, when Jesus asked the blind man whether he could see anything, **the man looked up and said, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.”** It was like a botched cataract surgery!

 The healing was partial; the man could see, but his vision was still blurry. Was Jesus, then, a defective healer? Was Jesus unable to heal right? Did he lack God’s power? No. It’s just that sometimes God heals gradually.

 Many of the healings God brings to us are gradual when you think about it. Those antibodies from our white blood cells that come to attack infections often take time to overcome the foreign agents. And the regeneration of cells and tissues, awesome as it is, takes time. Bones need to be held in place while they are knit back together. Stitches keep wounds closed until the body can regenerate skin. Yet all these amazing things, not to mention the natural anesthetics and analgesics, the endorphins and serotonin and countless other hormones and health aids produced by our bodies—they are all gifts of God for healing, day by day, little by little. We are walking miracles; every day we are being healed. Usually, God heals gradually.

 Lastly, God keeps healing us until we are completely whole.

 When Jesus learned that the blind man’s vision was still blurred, **Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again, and he looked intently, and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.**

 Jesus stayed with the blind man until he was completely whole—and he didn’t charge him for a follow-up office call either!

 I find it so refreshing that we don’t have to pretend with God. We don’t have to say, “Yes, I feel great!” even when every bone in our body hurts and we feel lousy. We don’t need to fake our healing so that we don’t make God “feel bad.” We can just be honest, and God will stay with us as long as we need and want God’s help.

 This short poem says a lot about how many people live:

 “My face in the mirror

 Isn’t wrinkled or drawn,

 My house isn’t dirty,

 The cobwebs are gone.

 My garden looks lovely

 And so does my lawn.

 I think I might never

 Put my glasses back on.”

We don’t have to go through life afraid to put on our glasses, afraid of some truth that we don’t want to see. We can live honest lives and be truthful about what God does and doesn’t do in our lives. God doesn’t always heal like we want, but God keeps healing us until we are completely whole.

 I imagine that some of you are now thinking about people you know—people who were ill and didn’t make it, people you loved who didn’t come through their diseases and traumas. You may be saying to yourselves, “What about *those* people? Where was this healing God when those people needed it? Aren’t you just sticking your head in the sand on that one, Carlan? Aren’t you just doing the very same thing you told us not to do?

 How could I possibly pretend? As a pastor I have walked with people through illness and grief for 40 years. No, the healing we seek and pray for does not always come. The miracles we long for do not always happen. And yet, everything I know doesn’t change the truth that God stays with us until we are whole. The ultimate healing is a body that never gets sick, a mind that never breaks down, a soul that never dies. Those of you who were in the Revelation Bible Study know that in the end, there will be no more crying, no more pain, no more mourning, no more death in that resurrection body. You see, in spite of all the healings God brings to us along the way, our DNA doesn’t make us live forever in this life. We need to be recreated, refashioned into something eternal. And God walks with us right into that future blessing.

 What, then, shall we say? Does God still heal today? The answer to that question is the same as the answer to another one: Does the God of Jesus still exist? And if God is still present, if God is still God, why would that God who loves us more than we love ourselves suddenly stop caring about us and healing us?

 Dear loved ones, God *does* still heal today. God still offers hope. That’s why we offer prayers for healing today.

 Following the Hymn of the Day, you are welcome to receive a laying on of hands and prayer for healing in the Name of Christ if you wish to do so for any reason at all. Perhaps you have been ill in some way and have a need for physical healing. Perhaps you are anxious and depressed and have a need for mental healing. Perhaps you find yourself feeling far from God and have a need for spiritual healing. Or perhaps you want to come as an act of prayer for someone else whom you know to be in need of healing. Whatever your reason, you are welcome. We ask only one thing, that as you kneel at the communion rail for prayer, you speak your first name or the name of the one you seek healing for so that Pat and I may make our prayer personal for you.

 We have a wonderful, compassionate God, a God who cares about you and all those you love. We have a God who heals.

Amen.