

Hurting People Will Be Healed

Isaiah 35: 1-10

Good Morning Friends,

I'm thankful to be able to join with each one of you in worship this morning.

When people describe the life and ministry of Jesus, even those outside the bounds of a Christian Faith, the words healing and healer are likely to be brought up. To be sure, some of Jesus' most well known miracles involve a physical healing. The lame man who picks up his mat, and practically bounds and skips away, praising God. The blind man, restored to full sight. Jarius' daughter and Lazauras, raised from death. We often pray to God, as the great Physician, to cure our ailments and those of the ones we love. These are good, beautiful gifts from our God. As we have been exploring these stories together over the past couple of months, I've realized how narrow my own view of what exactly healing means has been.

This happened to me, somewhere along the way in my own faith journey, growing up in the church. As a kid, we would pray at home and at church for someone to get better, to get well, to be healed, and I began to understand healing as Jesus fixing something. As Jesus coming along, ticking the little box that said "Healthy" instead of "Sick". Jesus

removing pathology, difference or struggle. Healing meant that Jesus would make someone normal. In my childhood understanding, healing meant Jesus making someone more like me.

I'm thankful to say that my understanding of the theology of healing has grown and changed, but I still feel like that pull sometimes towards healing as fixing, healing as curing the specific thing that is wrong.

That certainly is an element of healing, but our beautiful scripture passage from this morning tells us that the healing Jesus offers is something much more than ticking a little box, something much more than making things "better". I'll read a bit from Isaiah 35 again, starting in verse 5,

"Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,
and the ears of the deaf will be cleared.

Then the lame will leap like the deer,
and the tongue of the speechless will sing.

Waters will spring up in the desert,
and streams in the wilderness.

The burning sand will become a pool,
and the thirsty ground, fountains of water.

The jackals' habitat, a pasture;
grass will become reeds and rushes.

A highway will be there.

It will be called The Holy Way.”

Jesus, the one whom the Prophet Isaiah sings about, breaks through a narrow idea of healing and says, “I will be the one to restore all things, to redeem all things, to bring life to all creation- the earth, the animals, people, you and me!” All of us are included in this flourish vision of life and flourishing, or restoration and redemption. When I hear these words I think yes, that’s what I long for! The binary of sick and well is not part of Isaiah’s song of Jesus, rather it is the song of abundant life.

Last year, our beloved Anna lent me this book, *“To Be Made Well: An invitation to wholeness, healing and hope”* by Amy Julia Becker. It’s a wonderful book, part memoir, part unpacking of Biblical stories of Jesus’ healing. Becker writes this, “Jesus’ healing involved physical restoration for countless individuals, much as physicians set bones and prescribe medication today. But as we see over and over again in the Gospels, the personal, spiritual and social healing that Jesus offers goes further and wider than any bottle of pills or fiberglass cast ever could. I return to Jesus as a healer because I want to understand and experience healing that both takes my body seriously and goes deeper than my body. I want to participate in healing that extends beyond my own individual needs, as we see in the stories of Jesus not simply healing the sick, but restoring them to community. For me to participate in the wider and broader work of healing, I need more than my annual physical or a list of steps for self-improvement. I need more than a lesson in breathing and brain chemistry, as fascinating and helpful as

all those things are. I need help from outside myself. From the one whose very name means healing.” Becker’s words capture the heart of Isaiah’s prophecy.

So, what does it mean for us, as followers of Jesus? How do we begin to participate and live into this vision of wholeness that the text speaks about?

First, we must recognize that Jesus' healing is for us, ALL of us. There are places within ourselves that need the healing of Jesus, be it physical, emotional, mental or spiritual. Some of the fittest, healthiest people are mired in anger or shame. Some of the most weary, broken bodies offer the most love and grace into this world. We all need Jesus.

Growing up in my Baptist Church, in small town in Minnesota, I remember one Sunday morning, during the middle of the worship service, a young mother, carrying a baby in her arms dashed up to the front of the church where the stage was. The church was laid out with a raised stage, all the chairs were on the floor, so it was easy to see the people on the stage. She called out tearfully as she ran, “Help! I need help! I need prayer!” The rest of her words were lost in her tears. And the people leading worship at the front surrounded her, others from the congregation stepped forward, our pastor, with his cane, made his way up the stage steps and surrounded this woman, praying with her. To be clear, this sort of thing was not part of church culture, a church mostly filled with people to a stoic, Norwegian heritage. Some folks in the pews were moved witnessing this moment, others embarrassed for the woman. I’m embarrassed to say that I mostly recall looking down at the floor. You weren’t supposed to be this vocal, this undone

about your need for help, your need for healing. I heard later that this woman was suffering from severe postpartum depression.

Looking back though, I think she understood something that I'm often able to gloss over in my daily life- my own need for healing. The truth that I, and really all of us, are not okay. There are places within us that need the abundant life that Jesus promises us, that the Prophets foretold. When we come to the end of ourselves, our ability to maintain appearances, our ability to wield control, it is there that we meet Jesus, the Healer.

Secondly, we can open ourselves up to a broader definition of healing. I was speaking with a friend a while ago who had attended a NAIITS conference, NAIITS is the acronym for North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies. She said that one of the speakers had talked about how in western culture, healing is about fixing something, about getting something sorted out so that it's done, completed. In speaking about residential schools, the speaker felt like the general public wanted to hear, "we were traumatized, but now we're healed." this idea of completion, of nothing more needing to be done, but, this speaker said, Indigenous Cultures see healing more as a process, a movement towards wholeness.

This broader definition of Healing allows us to experience the wholeness that Jesus offers even as we live our broken bodies, our fragile, jars of clay as the Apostle Paul calls us in 2 Corinthians.

In an essay he wrote, Kyle Stevenson, a Baptist Minister with Cerebral Palsy, said that often people would ask if they could pray for him, he would say, “certainly, what would you like to pray for?” The person would stare at him dumbfounded and say, “for your healing, of course!” In the essay, Stevenson explores the idea that while he needs healing as much as anyone else, that healing doesn’t need to mean bodily change. He writes, “God does heal. However, God does not always cure, and there may not need to be a cure.” I just love that. “God does heal. However, God does not always cure, and there may not need to be a cure.” Stevenson’s expansive definition of healing invites welcoming the changing work of Jesus in our lives here and now; exactly as we are. Jesus can make us whole, even when we are undone. Jesus can make me whole, even when I’m laid low by migraines. Jesus’ wholeness is a journey we can walk now, even as we wait for the fullness of healing in his presence. Here in this space of the now and the not yet, in the building of a New Kingdom that only Jesus can complete, we can be made whole.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, that the healing offers, to each one of us, is at its core about love. The deep, abiding love of Jesus. Love changes us, love that sees us for who we are, love welcomes all that parts of that we’d rather hide, even from ourselves. I often tell my kiddos, “God loves. Nothing you could ever say or do would make God love you less. And nothing you could ever do or say would make God love you more.” Most of the time, those are the words that I need to hear too. Love welcomes us to the table, exactly as we are, and says, “Take and Eat. This is my body, broken for you.”

This expansive vision of healing, as foretold by Isaiah also instructs us that even in our brokenness, Jesus equips us to be agents of healing through the love of God. Our own Anabaptist conviction of how faith is meant to be lived in community is also a place where God healing love can flow to one another, and into our communities.

Returning again, to Becker's words: "Healing does not only come from miraculous physical transformation. It does not only come from reconnecting mind, body, and spirit. Nor does it arise only out of experiencing forgiveness or acceptance by God. Healing also happens when we are received as vital members of a community, in love. Healing happens when we know we are welcomed, when we know we belong. Jesus' ministry of healing weds the personal and social aspects of healing in a way that most of our church and our secular culture haven't managed to do. For him, the fragmented self is fully restored only in and as it is restored in community, and the community is made whole only in and as the individual members experience shalom. The presence of God-creator, image maker, abounding in love and forgiveness- is known and experienced not only as we connect body, mind and spirit, but also as we connect to one another. Healing depends upon God. And healing depends upon us. Restored to ourselves. Restored to God. And restored to one another. We need Jesus, and we need each other, to be made well."

God works through us, in community, to be agents of love and healing. Agents who help to bring life in broken and weary spaces and places, agents who proclaim with the Prophet, “The desert and the dry land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus.
They will burst into bloom,
and rejoice with joy and singing.”

I'll close with a story. Some time ago, I came across a Washington Post article from 2016 entitled The White Flight of Derek Black. It was a fascinating, beautiful article, if you have time to read it, I would suggest looking it up.

Derek Black, as a teen and young adult was a well known white nationalist. His Father was infamous within the White Supremacy Movement in the United States and the hope was that young David would be the future, the heir, if you will of the movement. Derek spoke at events and made a for-kids version of a notorious white nationalist website. He ended up attending a mid-size liberal arts university in Florida, a few hours from his home. He lived a mostly normal student life, all while calling into join his Dad's week talk radio show, espousing white power and calling for the forced deportation of Jews and People of Colour from the States. In his second year of University, some students put together the pieces and outed Derek and all his writings on an online forum for the university's students. Understandably, there was anger, outrage and aggressive threats made about what should happen to “this guy”

Somewhere in all this anger, rage, and frightening ideologies, a Jewish student, named Matthew, who remembered Derek from his dormitory the year before, invited him over for Shabbat Dinner, the Jewish Sabbath Meal. Matthew decided his best chance to affect Derek's thinking was not to ignore him or confront him, but simply to include him. "Maybe he'd never spent time with a Jewish person before," Matthew remembered thinking. It was the only social invitation Derek had received since returning to campus, so he agreed to go. The Shabbat meals had sometimes included eight or 10 students, but this time only a few showed up. "Let's try to treat him like anyone else," Matthew remembered instructing them."

Over the months that followed, Derek kept showing up to Matthew's Shabbat Meals. There was a rotating group of students, most of his guests were Christian, atheist, black or Hispanic — anyone open-minded enough to listen to a few blessings in Hebrew. Sometimes they talked about nothing in particular, sometimes they listened while Derek talked, sometimes they pushed back on his ideologies. Yet it was always in this community, around Matthew's table. And slowly, Derek began to wrestle with his beliefs, the white supremacy began to fall away, when he realized he couldn't reconcile his beliefs about white superiority, and forced deportation of his friends at the table. In Spring of 2013, Derek publicly (and without his family's prior knowledge) disavowed white nationalism.

There are a lot more details, twists and turns in the article, but what struck me as so beautiful about this story is that Derek experienced real healing, through a real, loving

community. Derek wasn't healed- and then welcomed into the community. He was welcomed into the community-and then healed. Just as God welcomes all of us, and it is there that we encounter healing.

In closing, Friends, Jesus has come to Heal us, to mend all that is broken, to bring springs of living water to all the parts of our world and of ourselves that are bone dry and weary. In the person of Jesus, God in the Human Form, we encounter a love that welcomes us, heals us, redeems us, and then sends us out to offer healing love to our friends and strangers, neighbours and enemies, indeed, everyone who is loved by God- all of us.

Amen.