

“Treasure: Physical Health”

Matthew 8: 1-4: 16-17 (The Message Version)

This Sunday, we begin our Lenten journey. Our theme this year is “Holy Vessels: A Lenten Season of Recovery”. This theme reminds us that each of us is created a precious and holy vessel of embodied love. This theme names the fact that we have been through a harrowing time since last Lent which has shattered our sense of wholeness in body, mind and spirit. This theme invites us to explore the healing narratives of Jesus which tell of divine solidarity with our suffering. This theme reminds us that we can begin a journey toward making something beautiful from that which is seemingly broken.

I cannot take credit for this theme. Unlike in years past, when a creative spark would take hold in planning, this year, I had nothing. So when I came upon this theme created by Worship Design Studio, it was almost as if the Spirit was indeed saying, “Come to me, all you that are **weary** and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

As I explored more of the materials associated with this theme, I knew that I wasn't only connecting to it as a tired pastor. As a Disciple of Christ, whose very mission is to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world, this theme

resonated with me spiritually on so many levels but there was also something more. This theme of being holy vessels, of offering a season of recovery to our physical, mental, communal, spiritual, emotional health spoke to where we are as a community of faith, as a culture, as a society.

This March will be the year anniversary of when everything shifted, when everything was stripped bare, when everything broke. As a society, as a result of this pandemic, we have realized what we took for granted in our lives, realized what we assumed was normal way of being for everyone. As a result of this pandemic, we realized that things will not go back, that things should not go back to the way things were before March 2020. As a result of this pandemic, we are coming to terms with the fact that the very foundations of our world have crumbled and fallen apart, leading us to be in a constant state of deep grief.

I often tell people that in moments like these when we are experiencing great loss, when we can look down and see everything we thought we knew, shattered around our feet, there is only one thing we can do. We can pick up the pieces, examining to see if they still fit. If they don't, we grieve. We grieve over what was. We grieve over what could have been. We grieve and then we let go. And with the pieces which remain, the pieces which still fit, which still work, these pieces are

our Truth. We hold onto these pieces because they give us strength. They give us comfort. They give us renewal.

And it is these pieces which we will explore over the next six weeks. Like glass which is tumbled by the sea, or broken pottery which is repaired with gold, these pieces which bring strength, which bring renewal, which bring comfort during this Lenten Season of recovery, these pieces are our treasure. Over the next six weeks, these pieces will become transformed into something beautiful, something which offers healing and wholeness to a fragmented world.

At this time, I invite us to listen to our Scripture for this morning. It can be found in the Gospel of Matthew, 8th chapter. Verses 1-4 and 16-17. Hear now these words:

8 ¹⁻² Jesus came down the mountain with the cheers of the crowd still ringing in his ears. Then a leper appeared and dropped to his knees before Jesus, praying, "Master, if you want to, you can heal my body."

³⁻⁴ Jesus reached out and touched him, saying, "I want to. Be clean." Then and there, all signs of the leprosy were gone. Jesus said, "Don't talk about this all over town. Just quietly present your healed body to the priest, along with the appropriate expressions of thanks to God. Your cleansed and grateful life, not your words, will bear witness to what I have done."

That evening a lot of demon-afflicted people were brought to him. He relieved the inwardly tormented. He cured the bodily ill. He fulfilled Isaiah's well-known revelation:

He took our illnesses, He carried our diseases The Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

We begin our Lenten story with a story of healing found in the Gospel of Matthew. I have to tell you that I have a better understanding of the sense of isolation this person in our story must have felt each and every day. After a year of social distancing, after a year of 6 feet physical distance between myself and others, after a year of worrying that our touch might give disease to our loved ones, I have a better understanding of the disconnection, of the lack of community, of the overwhelming sense of loneliness that this person must have felt day in and day out.

In our story, we are told he is a leper. And because of his disease, he was purposely separated by the powers that be from his community, from his family, from his worship space. He was forced to live in isolation. This separation from others became a permanent boundary for this man. There was nothing he could do to physically remove this boundary. It was a part of him. It was a part of his identity. It was all that people saw when they encountered him. He was an outsider, pushed to the margins, ignored and forgotten.

The isolation, the separation that this man experienced day in and day had to be soul-numbing. It had to have drain him of his self-worth. This isolation, this separation in a sense was like death for this man with no hope of ever being reborn.

So it should not surprise us that this man, when he sees Jesus, asks Jesus to heal him. We know that earlier in the Gospel that Jesus healed people but we are not given much detail about those healings. Matthew does this to give a glimpse into who Jesus is but Matthew knows that something more to Jesus than simply being to heal people. Matthew knew that Jesus was not alone in offering healing to people. Others healed people in God's name as well. The difference was that if healing did not happen, then the healer could say God did not choose to make that person well. Yes, I know bad theology, and another sermon for another day.

For Matthew, this is all background to the healing in our text for today. The surprising piece is not that the man asked to be healed. The surprising piece is Jesus' response to this request. Jesus simply says, I do choose...I do choose to heal you. I do choose to see you not as your disease but as a Beloved Child of God. I do choose to connect with you. I do choose to reach out and touch you. I do choose to bring you healing and wholeness.

For Matthew, that's the whole point of this healing story. Matthew does not tell us this healing story to establish Jesus as a miracle worker but to make clearer for his readers the significance of the action." Matthew wants us to understand that in all that Jesus does, he "crosses social boundaries in every way imaginable. Jesus

“transcends social boundaries of various kinds, especially boundaries that exclude individuals from participating in the community of God’s holy people.”

Before this healing story in Chapter 8, For the last two chapters of this Gospel, Jesus has been teaching the principles found in the Sermon on the Mount. He has been telling his disciples what is needed to bring about the Kingdom of God here on Earth, telling his disciples how to live out God’s grace and love in all that they do and say. And now, with this healing story, Jesus shows his disciples how to put these teachings into actions. He shows them what it means to live out our lives with the Kingdom of God as our guide.

Jesus shows his disciples that Kingdom living involves embracing healing and wholeness for all of God's people. It involves bringing about new life from that which was seemingly broken. It involves naming the hurts which continue to divide and separate. It involves actively working on reconciliation. "

Kingdom living involves choosing life for ourselves and for others. It involves choosing to connect with others, to reach across all those boundaries whether physical or social, it means drawing the circle wide and inviting all to be seen as Beloved Children of God.

Because what Jesus understands is that healing and wholeness is so much more than simply the cure of a physical disease. Healing and Wholeness for all of God's people is intertwined with all of our well-being...physical, social, communal, mental, and emotional. If one part of the Body of Christ is not well, then all the Body of Christ is not well.

For disciples of Christ, to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world means to recover the beauty of grace and live in our lives, not only for ourselves but for others as well.

I don't pretend to have all the answers but what I do know is that I have heard so many people say that what they miss most during this time of isolation and separation is being able to hug others, to shake hands, to simply experience the gift of human touch in our lives.

We are not at the point where it is safe to do these things yet. But soon, very soon, we will be able to hug our loved ones without worrying if we are passing on disease. We will be able to extend healing through our touch, reminding people of our connection to one another, reminding people that we are part of community together. Soon, very soon, we will be able to choose to extend the gift of human touch to one another, crossing the boundaries of isolation and separation, so that no one is ignored or forgotten but all will be comforted.

Because remembering and demonstrating our connection with one another, by seeing each other as Beloved children of God, by knowing that we are all Treasures of God, who are recovering our depth of love for all and our joy of living in this world, that is beginning of compassion for ourselves and for others. That is the beginning of healing That is the beginning of recovering our sense of wholeness as the Body of Christ.

So it is my prayer and my hope that as we begin this season of recovery, as we begin to reclaim our sense of wholeness, as we begin to imagine ways we can cross the boundaries of isolation and separation which fill our world right now, it is my hope and my prayer, that the words of Jesus ring in our ears:

“I do choose you. I choose to bring you life. I choose to heal you and make you whole. May it be so. Amen.