

Sermon for The Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 18, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa 52101
Pastor: Pr. Marion Pruitt-Jefferson

First Reading: Exodus 19:2-8a; Psalm 100; Second Reading: Romans 5:1-8; Gospel: Matthew 9:35-10:8

Beloved of God,

Today I want to talk with you about healing: our own, and the healing of the world.

You might be wondering about that choice of topic. Like me, perhaps your first impressions of the scripture we just heard was something like this: OK – this is another commissioning story. Sort of like last week when we heard Jesus tell his disciples to Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It seems pretty straightforward: Jesus gathers his disciples and tells them that “the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.” Then he sends them out to do the stuff disciples are supposed to do.

But as I read the passage again, my attention was drawn to the emphasis that is given to the work of healing. Even though there is no specific account of healing recorded here, still the ministry of healing is mentioned 9 times in just these 12 brief verses.

First, Matthew gives us a summary of Jesus’ ministry: Jesus teaches, proclaims the good news of the kingdom, and cures every disease and every sickness. Notice the emphasis Matthew gives to Jesus’ work of healing by giving it double billing.

Next, Matthew tells us that Jesus summons the 12 disciples and gives them authority to cast out unclean spirits, and to “cure every disease and every sickness.” The authority Jesus gives his followers is rooted and grounded in God’s own compassion. It is not an authority to power, but an authority to loving service.

Finally, Jesus sends his followers out with these specific instructions: cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.

Now, I hope that at least a few of you are thinking to yourselves: Whoa, whoa, whoa, Pr. Marion. What about that saying about the laborers and the harvest? How does that fit into Jesus’ call to the ministry of healing?

For a long time the saying about the harvest has been understood as a call to mission – and even more specifically as a call to missionary service. This traditional interpretation has understood the harvest to represent the multitudes of folks who have never heard about the salvation offered in Jesus Christ. And the laborers as the followers of Jesus who are called to go out and bring in a harvest of souls for God’s kingdom. Even though I spent 4 years serving as a missionary in Japan, this interpretation is not very appealing to me.

But if we look at this saying in context - surrounded by all of the references to healing, I'm wondering if it might yield a broader interpretation. Maybe the "harvest" that Jesus is talking about is a harvest of compassion - and the laborers who are sent out into the fields are the followers of Jesus who have been given the authority to bring healing to a broken and hurting world.

However we want to understand this particular saying, one thing remains clear: Healing is central to the work of Jesus. Healing is what Jesus does more of than anything else. As the present day followers of Jesus, we too are called to participate in the work of healing, both as ones who have experienced God's healing mercy, and as the ones who are called and commissioned to bring that same healing to the world.

So what might that mean for us today?

I think that before we do anything else, we must give thanks to God for healing God has brought about in our lives. I know some of your stories of healing, and I rejoice in that with you. Some of you know that I experienced life-changing healing when I participated in the pain clinic at Mayo. I can also tell you that there's a lot more healing that still needs to take place in me. So maybe the next step is to recognize and acknowledge the places in our lives that in need of God's healing mercy. Healing of broken relationships. Healing of failures and disappointments. Healing of shame and guilt. Healing for childhood wounds and betrayed trust. Maybe you too are in need of this sort of inner healing. The good news for us today is that Jesus is the very embodiment of God's healing work in all creation. And Jesus is with us here today - present to us in the faces of our neighbors, in the Word proclaimed, in the prayers lifted up, and most certainly in the bread and wine of this gracious meal. Here we open our hands and our hearts to receive the compassionate healing of God in Jesus.

Then, after attending to our own deep brokenness and need, we ready to be sent out to bring healing and hope to others.

Naturally Jesus' call to the ministry of healing includes those of you who are health care professionals, - physicians, nurses, counselors, therapists, aides, dieticians, care-givers, and the multitude of support staff that make healing work possible. You have the opportunity each day to participate in Jesus' healing ministry. But many of us, myself included, are not health care workers. And that's OK, because the work of healing includes all of many and diverse ways in which our human lives and our human communities are broken and wounded.

Each time we give our attention and care to those who are grieving, lonely or forgotten, we are participating in the ministry of healing. When we work for reconciliation, both in our personal relationships and within divided communities, we are doing the healing work of Jesus. Maybe one of the most powerful ways we can participate God's healing is when we practice generous forgiveness, both for ourselves, and for those who have hurt us. We bring God's healing mercy when we dare to go into difficult places and simply listen compassionately to the pain of another person - places like nursing homes, prisons, food pantries, homeless shelters. We participate in the work of healing when we speak out against injustice, discrimination, and racial bias. When we make financial contributions to the work of our church, we are participating in the healing ministry of organizations like Lutheran Social Services, Lutheran Disaster Response, ELCA World Hunger Appeal, and Lutheran World Relief. Through these ministries God's healing work has a global reach. Participating in the healing work of Jesus can also include advocating for

public policies that protect the most vulnerable members of society. The ELCA Advocacy Network is one way we can engage in this work. One of the advocacy network's current initiatives concerns the proposed federal budget. Budgets – whether they are our household budgets, our church budgets, or our national budget – are moral documents. Our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, has joined the Episcopal Bishop, Michael Curry, to issue a statement expressing deep concern about how proposed budget cuts will affect those who live on the margins of our society. You can read that statement and learn more about the ELCA Advocacy network by following the web address that's printed in the bulletin. These and many, many more are some of the ways each of us can participate in the ministry of healing.

But now, we hear God's gracious invitation to each of today - to come again to this holy meal, where in a morsel of bread and taste of wine, we receive Jesus' healing for all that is wounded and broken in our lives. Here God's love is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, so that with hope and faith and love, we can answer God's call to be healers in our families, our communities, and in the world.