

Towson Presbyterian Church

Rev. Joel Strom

March 31, 2019

Luke 17:11-19

“Hungering for Healing & Wholeness”

Today we continue our Lenten sermon series called “Hungering for What Matters,” and for the last few weeks Rob has been saying that we actually hunger for things in our lives that we might not realize. Whether we consciously recognize it or not, deep down we hunger for relationship with God, intimacy and connection with family and friends, and ultimately, we desire meaning in our lives. Today, we explore our hunger and our longing for healing and wholeness.

Our scripture from Luke 17 is one of the many healing stories in the Gospels. Jesus heals ten lepers and one returns to thank him. Jesus responds by saying, *“Get up and go, your faith has made you well.”* This is really a beautiful story. That all ten were healed is wonderful, and the gratefulness of the Samaritan who returned paints a great picture of this connection between him and Jesus. It’s a classic Jesus healing story, however, it’s also a story that at times has done just as much harm as it has good for people of faith, because we can read it in such a way that says that the Samaritan lepers’ *faith* is what healed him.

People have read this story and made assumptions – *you might have done this just now while listening to it* - that our faith, or the depth of our faith, is what is needed for God to offer physical healing. And if you’re like me, I would assume that at times you have prayed for God’s healing touch to be upon someone you love, or upon yourself, and sometimes that prayer has been granted, and sometimes it has not. And if that prayer has not been answered how you hoped it would be, we can read this story and say, “Well, I guess my faith just wasn’t strong enough. If I only had more faith, God would have answered my prayer.”

Physical healing and faith and prayer can truly be a mystery sometimes, can’t it? Sometimes God heals and sometimes God does not heal, and I don’t assume to have the answer to how physical healing works when we ask God for help.

So was it the strength or depth of the Samaritans’ faith that healed him?

No. It was not. It was not the Samaritans’ faith that healed him. All ten were healed on their way to see the Priest, which they had to do to be allowed back into their community. Nothing is said of the other nine’s depth of faith or if they had any at all! All that’s noted is Jesus’s power and desire to heal. The ten lepers cried out, “Jesus, have mercy on us!” And Jesus responds with an emphatic **“YES.”**

And to stop right there at that part of the story and only focus on the physical healing of the lepers would be to really miss the whole point of this story. So much more is going on here and something has begun within the Samaritan who comes back to Jesus to give thanks and praise.

Jesus's affirmation at the end of our reading – “Your faith has made you well” – can be translated from its original Greek in multiple ways. The version of the Bible we read from, the NRSV, translates the last word as “well.” It can also be translated as “saved” – your faith has *saved you* – but not for another distant time far away, but for right now in the present moment. And the King James Version of the Bible uses the word “whole” - your faith has made you “*whole*.” The Samaritan has tapped into something outside of just the physical.

Today we are hungering for healing in our lives, and we are also hungering for wholeness in our lives. Wholeness is something that stretches beyond physical healing. Wholeness can come with physical healing and it can come without physical healing. Wholeness can be an inner healing that leads to an inner peace. Wholeness is the healing of our spirits and the healing of our souls.

Wholeness is not just the physical, but something deeper. Sometimes God heals us physically, whether that be through the gifts of modern medicine and doctors and nurses, or through the supernatural, and sometimes God does not heal us physically, but the invitation to wholeness, to this inner healing that Jesus brings, is always there.

The second half of today's scripture reading is really the meat of the story, and how we read Jesus's words will help decide how we understand it. The Samaritan returns and lays himself in front of Jesus, giving thanks to him and praising God. And we can hear Jesus's response to this action in a couple ways. I've probably read the three questions he then asks and usually heard frustration and disappointment in his voice. I have read his questions in such a way where it almost sounded like Jesus was scolding the other nine lepers? Did you hear him saying this: *I give you a gift and you can't even say thank you*. But to read it that way would be to disregard the concern and compassion and love that Jesus exemplified over and over in his ministry. To read it that way is to hear it about his needs than those around him.

Instead, we can read it in such a way that we can hear Jesus's longing, hope and desire for the other nine to experience more than just physical healing. Or to say it in another way: *My healing has only begun in them. Where are they? There is so much more I want to give them*.

The ten lepers were healed from this horrible disease – thanks be to God. When you had leprosy, you literally were cut off from society. Either your friends and family shunned you out of fear of getting too close and contacting it themselves, or ... you cut yourself off and walked away from your parents or your spouse and your children out of fear they very well would become afflicted with it too. You were either alone, or you found a community of lepers and made a home with them. You really had no contact with anyone besides your fellow lepers. People saw you and quickly walked to the other side of the road.

At the same time that leprosy was growing all over a person's body, I imagine that wounds were forming deep within them as well. These wounds of rejection and the wounds of feeling less than human. The wounds of being shunned by their family and friends or the guilt of cutting themselves off from family and friends. These different kinds of wounds I'm sure went deep.

This Samaritan man returns to Jesus to give thanks and to praise God, and Jesus wonders, “*Where are the other nine? For my healing has only just begun in them. The physical was only just the beginning.*” And the Samaritan, in his connection to a loving God and a grateful heart, it seems that he is on the path towards wholeness and healing wounds that were more than just the physical.

In my own journey towards wholeness, this inner healing, this healing of the soul that God longs for in each of us, I’ve had to recognize some wounds that are in me that need to be healed. And that’s probably the first step – recognizing our need for healing. And I’ve gone back in my life, even back to Middle School, and noted that there are wounds from that *wonderful* time in my life that still have not been healed. And it’s caused me to pause and say, “Really? I’m still dealing with that? There’s *still* a wound there?”

In our journey to healing and wholeness that Jesus invites us into, we probably will always carry our wounds with us. They probably won’t go completely away. But God’s desire for us, God’s *longing* for us, is that our wounds will be healed in such a way that they no longer control us or have power over us, and that we will keep becoming the children of God that God has created us to be.

The Samaritan who returned looks to Jesus with openness and trust and a grateful_heart. And maybe that’s how we enter into the invitation to wholeness, this inner healing of the soul. An openness to God’s good work in our lives.... a trust that a loving God desires wholeness in each of us....and a grateful heart that God does in fact heal.

If we are children of God, then God desires and longs for healing and wholeness in our lives. Thanks be to God.