

THE MEDICINE OF IMMORTALITY

Luke 23: 7-20

What is your biggest concern these days? Is it your finances? Is it a relationship in your life - your children, your parents, your spouse, a sibling, a friend? Is it climate change? Or is it a health concern? Well, for many of us, health is a major concern if not a number one concern. There is our health and the health of those we care about. We are all vulnerable and some of us exceedingly so. Whether we have some major condition that we must learn to live with or an illness that can prove fatal if we don't find a cure, we can be totally preoccupied with our health. Whether it's something physical, whether it's something mental or spiritual, whether it's something that happens to us by accident or rather suddenly, or whether it's something in our genetic history, the amount of time, energy and money we put into our health and the health of those we care about is massive. And for good reason, of course.

But what role does medicine play in our health and what role do we ourselves play in our health? Our western medical system has become exceedingly dependent on surgery and drugs to manage if not cure illness. Our pharmaceutical companies are among the largest profit-making enterprises, and a big part of that is selling the promise that the right medicine can do wonders for your health.

On the other end of the spectrum is the whole growth of the wellness industry touting diet and eating the right foods on the one hand, and physical exercise and clean lifestyle on the other. There is also the whole naturopathic industry coming into conflict with the western pharmaceutical industry as the side effects of drugs can sometimes be worse than the promise of a cure. Finding more natural medicines and treatments offers the promise of a healthier overall outcome, if and when it works.

Finally, there is also what is called the "placebo" effect. A placebo is a make believe drug that works by making your mind believe what you are taking is real medicine. The capacity to believe healing is possible and to have a positive, hopeful and empowered attitude has been proven to have hugely therapeutic benefits beyond anything medicine itself can provide. The placebo can help healing happen even when there is no objective medicine in it. The medicine is in your body/mind/spirit believing in the healing that can happen and helping make it happen. Once again, though, even with all the faith in the world, a placebo may do little toward genuine healing.

Modern medicine has also more recently come to understand the critical importance of social support, spirituality, prayer and inner faith as equally important factors in a person's healing as anything drugs, surgery or medical advice can provide. Everyone here will have some story of what has and has not worked for you or someone you know about. And many of you will also know that the same thing may work for one person and not another.

But have we as humans always had such a preoccupation with health? Yes and no. Western science, technology and medicine have definitely brought us into a whole new era of expectations for our health, our quality of life and life expectancy also, so long as we have the privilege of healthy food, safety and security along with access to modern medicine. On the other hand, health and wellness in body and spirit have been preoccupations of humans as long as we have inhabited the earth. In fact, much of our scriptural language and content focuses on health. The word "salvation" itself comes from the word "salve" which according to the dictionary has both physical and spiritual meanings connected to health and healing. A salve is "an ointment used to promote healing of the skin or protection against infection". But a salve is also about soothing the human spirit or healing one's conscience. Salvation, then, is about healing and it's about wholeness, physical, mental and spiritual. What kind of healing and wholeness do you need right now in your life? Is it physical, is it mental, is it spiritual, or is it all three as they are interrelated?

OK, well the focus on health, healing and wholeness in the ancient world and in scripture is so central, in fact, that Holy Communion itself was seen, in the first few centuries, as a kind of medicine. In fact, within a hundred years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Holy Communion became known as "the medicine of immortality." In those early centuries, people were preoccupied with illness and death. Life could be hard and the lifespan of many people was not long. Disease and illness were rampant and there were few cures. The promise of life in Christ was resurrection and immortality. The promise of salvation was what was called "deification" – a process of becoming deified or immortalized, transcending death.

The promise of an eternity with God and within the kingdom of God made life in this world not only doable but worth putting yourself out there for. Those in power could abuse you, life could be harsh, illness and misfortune could strike you or those close to you, but eternally speaking you were being deified and made whole in God and nothing this world could do to you could take that away. What real empowerment to live and strive, to do justice, love kindness and live in Christ even as you lived in a perilous world! The promise of deification would give you courage to face the trials, tribulations and illnesses of life with faith, hope and love rather than despair.

OK, but why would holy communion be a medicine that when taken regularly could heal toward wholeness and deify toward immortality? Why holy communion? For this, we need to dive into our scripture reading this morning and contemplate its meaning with fresh eyes.

Holy Communion was instituted by Jesus as a last supper he had with his closest followers before he died. And it is very clear that Jesus wanted to give this supper special meaning. Jesus wanted to connect the meaning of Holy Communion to his death and promised resurrection. In order to do this, he chose the festival of the Passover as the occasion of the meal. Why Passover? Well Passover is all about the exodus of the people out of slavery into freedom. The story of the Passover is the master narrative of the whole bible. Every gospel account is framed on the Passover story and every part of the bible makes reference to the Exodus story. Freedom from slavery is at the core of what the Hebrews celebrated as their victory and whenever they experienced hardship or oppression again in their history, the story of Exodus empowered them to hope for freedom and fight for it too. Whether the colonial tyrant was Egypt or Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and latterly Rome, the promise of freedom was the dream that would keep rising up again and again after every colonial crucifixion...

And freedom? Freedom is freedom from colonial oppressors as much as it is freedom from illness as much as it is freedom from guilt and sin and the demons within. What is that from which you need freedom? What would genuine healing and wholeness look like in your life at this time you are living it? The Passover story is as grand as our imaginations and our need. Freedom, salvation, healing and wholeness are things we need at every moment we are alive. We are becoming whole but we are not whole yet. We are broken in need of healing and we need medicine to help us heal – from death to resurrection.

OK, so how does Holy Communion become such medicine? Well, Jesus not only tells them he is to suffer and die. He also tells them that he will not eat this meal with them again until he returns and the kingdom of God's love becomes a concrete reality in the world. Here's hoping and dreaming... But in the meantime, they are to celebrate this meal together and whenever they do, Jesus will not only be among them, but his resurrection power, his life-giving Spirit will grow **inside** them. And how is that? The bread they will break together and eat, and the cup they will share together and drink, will become his resurrecting, deifying power **in** them. Somehow, these earth grown elements of bread and wine will become his body and blood growing new spiritual life in them. As they keep sharing such meals together and sharing genuine love with one another, Christ will be growing among them and within them. Deification is also "Christification" (Christ entering us and his broken body rising up to new life in us).

OK, but let's get into the mechanics of it all more specifically, shall we. In Christian history there have been a range of views as to how the bread and wine in Holy Communion, eaten and drunk repeatedly, become new life in us. On the one end are some who claim it's all in the bread and wine itself. Like modern medicine and pharmaceuticals, without the medicine itself it doesn't matter who the person is or what inner state they're in when they're taking in the medicine of bread and wine consecrated by prayer. On the other end of the spectrum, however, are those traditions within Christianity who put all the emphasis on the recipient. If you don't eat and drink in the right head space, with faith, hope and love in your heart, with humble repentance, thankfulness and attentiveness in your spirit, the bread and wine consecrated as it is with prayer is just that: bread and wine and nothing else.

As Presbyterians, we've landed in the middle here. We believe both ends are important. It matters that the bread and wine are consecrated. Something unique and special happens every time we gather to worship, pray, eat and drink together as the body of Christ. At the same time, it is equally important that we get into the right headspace, heart space and spirit space. We need to get grounded in our breathing and our receiving, open to what God can do in us and how Christ can grow in us. Jesus' broken body can rise up within us and his blood flowing from the wounds of all human oppression and suffering can become healing properties within us working their way through our own spirits, minds and even bodies. The medicine of immortality is all about our inner disposition of faith as much as it is about the actual bread we eat and wine we drink, consecrated by prayer.

OK, but do you believe this? Is it a mere placebo-effect if things happen within us? Healing is healing however it happens. Whatever happens to our bodies, without our mental and spiritual health also being activated toward wholeness it matters little. On the other hand, even as our bodies age and even as our bodies fail us at some point in our lives, our spirits may continue to deify and Christify so that even death becomes a transition on an eternal journey toward immortality in the fullness of love. To believe in such possibility while we are still alive can also empower us to cope with our illness now as we are living through it. And believing that Christ is growing inside us can give us a greater strength, calm and grace to face our conditions with capacities of courage and resilience we would not otherwise possess.

What do you think? What have you experienced? What fears harass you? What victories carry you? What uncertainties worry you? What hurts and wounds prevent genuine faith, hope and love from truly rising up within you? May the sharing of Holy Communion this day and every day we share it truly become Christ growing inside you, and may it truly become for you a medicine of immortality.

Amen.