

DO YOU NEED HEALING AND SAVING?

Psalm 23; Matthew 7: 24-29

I don't need healing and I don't need saving! Our conversation had gotten a little escalated. My recent friend at the gym had found out I was a minister. He was super fit and super healthy. An ex-boxer, he was giving me some pointers on how to work the heavy bag we were both hitting... He was meticulous with his health in every way. He watched everything he ate. He was super strong and all muscle. And yet, I saw other things in him. As a minister you get to notice things in people they don't tell you. He carried tension and intensity. Mastering his body was a way of keeping the lid on an obsessive need to hold things together that could easily spin out of control. I could see anger just below the surface. I could see pain, the pain of broken relationships and loneliness. There was no emotional bend in my friend. I worried that anything could easily happen in his life to knock some of the control he was holding so tight. And when this happened, as it does for any of us in life at times, he could fall into a deep dark pit with few spiritual resources to work his way out.

He was asking me about my work as a minister. I was in the business of spiritual healing and saving. But what if a person didn't need healing and saving? What if people didn't live out of guilt and shame and a sense that they were sinners? What if people felt healthy and whole and just fine about their lives? Wouldn't that put the church out of business?

Well, our conversation went on for months as we sweated together. But at one point, he just disappeared. I asked about him at the front desk. No one knew anything. His membership had just lapsed with no communication one way or the other. I worry about what may have happened.

But this raises some questions for all of us here this morning. Do we need healing and saving? How do we think about illness, wellness and wholeness? How do we think about salvation?

Well, let's begin with some definitions. The ancient world and the modern world have very different ideas about illness, wellness and wholeness. The word 'salvation' comes from the old Latin words '*Salvare*' and '*Salus*.' Healing ointment and salve comes from *salvare*, and *salus* means wholeness. In other words, salvation is about healing, wellness and wholeness. But here's the thing. In the ancient world, healing, wellness and wholeness were for everyone. It wasn't just something for people deemed sick. We were all in need of spiritual therapy. If we weren't growing and transforming in our lives, we were sick. Sickness and transformation applied to all of us, and it was about our spirit and heart as much as our minds and bodies.

But unfortunately, with the modern development of science and medicine, especially in the western world, things got separated into various compartments. There was body and mind and spirit. There was sickness and wellness, illness and wholeness, and there was little crossover. If you were sick, modern medicine could provide you with the right medicine, surgery, therapy and counselling so that you could get well again, as close to the way you were before as possible. The same applied to mental illness and spiritual distress. You needed to get well and be in control of your life again. The church could only be in business if they could put the fear of God in you, persuade you that you were spiritually sick and a sinner in need of salvation so you could avoid hell and get to heaven. But if you were free of that fear, you were free to claim your own life, your own wholeness and your own destiny. You only needed God if you were too weak and scared to help yourself and solve your own problems your own way.

As you can imagine and as many of us know all too well, not only is this a bad way of thinking about sickness and health; it's a bad way to think about life as a whole. We need a more holistic understanding of sickness and health, healing, wholeness and salvation. Body, mind and spirit are all active in us at every moment we are alive, whether we think of ourselves as sick or well, broken or whole. Life is also a moving journey for us all. Salvation understood more holistically, is an ongoing journey of transformation through all that comes our way in life. We need inspiration and guidance for such transformation. Where will we find it? Let us delve into our scripture readings.

First, our gospel reading. Jesus concludes his core teaching called his "sermon on the mount" with the image of a house - two houses actually. The houses may look the same on the outside, and even on the inside. But where they are radically different is in their foundations. One house has no foundation other than the sand beneath it. The other

house has a foundation of solid rock. When all appears to be well, both houses look the same. It's only when the storms come that the difference is apparent. The house built on sand is totally blown away. The house built on solid rock is able to take the storm and not fall apart. And isn't this the way it is in the world around us too? Houses built with the right kind of foundation and support, especially in parts of the world where earthquake and storms are always a possibility, not only fare much better, but there are far fewer casualties too. But in parts of the world where there is poverty and shabby building practices, the effects of a storm are much more catastrophic.

Jesus is using this contrast of foundations to say that unless people build their lives on a solid spiritual foundation rooted in a relationship with God in spiritual community, they will have far less inner resilience to weather the storms of life. Unless people build their lives on a solid spiritual foundation rooted in a relationship with God in spiritual community, they will not find sufficient clarity, strength and wisdom in the midst of the storms. We may think we're doing well and we may believe we're as well-setup as anyone can be. But unless we've cultivated a spiritual foundation as Jesus is teaching it, how will we know what's truly possible for us?

Well, preacher, you're selling salvation again. That's what my gym friend would say. So, what does this spiritual foundation look like in one who lives it? Let's look at our 2nd scripture reading – Psalm 23. It has been read at funerals and in times of distress. It has been sung and prayed for thousands of years. What is it about this psalm that makes its mere 6 verses such powerful spiritual poetry? It's all in the imagery. Psalm 23 is able to portray the spiritual life in rich ways. Let's break it down in a few pieces and let's see whether we can find a basis for our own spiritual foundation.

There are three main parts to this psalm. It all begins with a foundation built on solid rock. What is that foundation? "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." The imagery of a shepherd with his sheep is a familiar one for ancient people. Kings and rulers were often called shepherds. A pastor is a shepherd too. The idea is this: A shepherd takes care of the sheep no matter what. A shepherd feeds the sheep, guides the sheep, protects the sheep and ensures the healthiest future for the sheep. God is the kind of shepherd that so fulfills every spiritual need the sheep may have, they shall want for nothing. They will have what they need to live fully and abundantly no matter what comes their way.

And just to reinforce this faith, the psalm offers two powerful images. One is a beautiful scene of serenity. Is there anything more peaceful and relaxed than lying down on lush green grass in an open pasture beside a lake with water totally still? Imagine such a scene as a description of your inner state of being. Isn't it totally restorative to so imagine? That's what it feels like to have complete faith in God's shepherdly care and guidance through life no matter what comes. We are refreshed and renewed for life's challenges.

The second image is one of guidance and direction. Life can be perplexing. Think about relationships, family issues, health issues, finances, life vocation. Imagine a certainty deep in your soul, a certainty that you are being led in the right paths no matter what situation you need to sort out and get through. Wouldn't that be amazing?

So then, a foundation is described: God is your shepherd you shall want for nothing. No matter what challenges come, your soul has resources for resilience, transformation and direction for good life choices.

But then, but then, the dark valleys come... According to recent studies, those who have suffered some kind of trauma and have found ways to come through, often develop better resilience to face challenges in life and thrive, than those who have never experienced trouble. But what is it that we need so that we learn and grow new kinds of strength?

What this psalm is teaching is that the more we develop a familiarity with God, talking it out and wrestling it out with God... the more we do this, the more we will find light for our way. And the wrestling part is important. We will have our dark valleys; that means doubt and questioning and a feeling that life is falling apart and out of control. But a relationship means that life is not over even when it feels that way. The long view recognizes that the most meaningful and empowering learning, growth and development of soul happens when we are stretched beyond where we've been before. We develop emotional and spiritual bend and elasticity. We are much better able to live through the dark valleys when we have resources to meet us in the dark depths. That's where we find God in the deepest and richest ways in life. We are not alone anymore, God is there, a crucified God who descends even into the darkest hell life can become.

And so, we begin to emerge from the dark valley. The latter part of the psalm points to various images of new strength – a table is set for me, in my honour, even as I am surrounded by enemies of all kinds. I will get through this and I will find new elevation without having to pretend that life is a walk in the park. My head is anointed with oil – another image of honour and vindication. God knows who I am even if the world does not appreciate it. There is an image of overflowing gratitude – my cup overflows. To find a place of thankfulness again and even a greater thankfulness. Why greater? Because I appreciate life's blessing in richer and deeper ways than before. Finally, there is an image of faith renewed and restored, but on an even stronger, more solid foundation – surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life now, and I carry a deep assurance about the future beyond anything I can see.

Can you imagine feeling that kind of clarity, inner strength, peace, honour, gratitude and assurance? That's what this psalm evokes. That's why it is so deeply treasured. That's what God and a relationship with God summons us to experience. Such a spiritual foundation is what a community like Armour Heights can be a part of in your life and in mine. Such a spiritual foundation supports body, mind, heart and soul. Such a spiritual foundation promotes a holistic journey of healing and salvation, even as we continue to face challenges of all kinds.

Let us pray: Find me, O God... in my body, my mind, my heart, my soul.... Find me in all those places I need your healing and salvation... find me in my dark valleys and find me in my easy confidence and need for control... find me, confront me and transform me so that life becomes an even greater gift... Amen.