

HEALING & WHOLENESS

Luke 18: 35-43; Jeremiah 31: 27-34

Beth and Vera had known each other for years. Both were members of the same church and both had been involved in various functions of the church. But aside from that, they were quite different. Beth came from a prominent family in the community. They had money and privilege, and their long association with the church ensured that healthy donations. Beth's husband was an elder and her son was chair of the board of managers. Beth headed the women's guild which raised lots of money for the church and its projects.

Vera, on the other hand, did her serving much more in the background. Her husband had stopped working due to a mental breakdown, followed by a debilitating depression. Vera had become his primary caregiver nursing him as he got sicker. Eventually, he developed cancer and given a late stage diagnosis died within a few years. Vera had had to manage his care while also working outside the home to help pay the bills and cover university tuition for their daughters. Even as she served in the church and attended when she could, Vera had little time to really get as involved in the church as she wanted. Now, many years later, her daughters well established with their own lives, looked forward to providing a happy and restful retirement for their mother, allowing her to enjoy all the interests she had always wanted to pursue. But alas, Vera was diagnosed with a terminal illness and hospitalized. Her final stay would be hospice care which her daughters were busy arranging. How sad.

Beth went to visit Vera in hospital. She was taken aback by how peaceful Vera was about her predicament. Rather than bitterness, Vera was grateful for the grace and strength God has given her to care for her husband and raise her daughters. She was grateful about the human beings her daughters had become and the loving care they were providing her. She was grateful for the life she had been given and had no regrets, even as life had turned out the way it had. Even as her body was failing, her spirit was aglow. How could this be?

Beth, on the other hand, was agitated and anxious. She felt things at the church could be going a lot better if the minister and some of the other elders listened better. She felt her children were so busy with their lives they had little time for her unless they needed babysitting or money. She resented her new neighbours who were busy constructing a mammoth house on top of the one they had because they had to have the biggest house on the block. Beth just couldn't help herself, even as she was there to visit Vera, her own frustrations, anxieties, disappointments and resentments kept coming to the surface...

So why was she telling all this to Vera? Vera was the one dying. Other than a few minor health concerns here and there, Beth was doing ok. And yet, she was the one unsettled, unhappy, not at peace, lacking something that Vera seemed to have for all her tragic circumstances. How could this be? Even as physically speaking Beth was the healthy one and Vera was the one dying, internally and spiritually, Vera had found the kind of fullness and peace Beth was totally missing. How could this be?

Was there some perspective, some inspiration, some energy from beyond that somehow had eluded Beth? What was Vera's secret?

Let's zero in on our scripture readings in search of revelatory guidance. In our first reading, there is a blind man sitting by the roadside begging. If all we knew about this man was his physical condition and the kind of desperate poverty that resorts to begging, we would pity him. But Jesus the healer sees something else in the man. Jesus' healing is not just magic. In a world without modern medicine, how does healing happen? Jesus encounters many people who are sick, but all of them cannot be healed. There is an internal quality Jesus is looking for in the kind of healing he can offer. This man not only wants desperately to be healed. He hasn't given up. He cries out for help. He takes the initiative even past the calls for him to be quiet. He will not give up or give in until he has had his moment with this healer.

And Jesus recognizes the spirit in the man. He stops. He goes to him. He asks him: "What do you want me to do for you?" Isn't it obvious Jesus? No. Jesus wants to hear him, see into his soul. What kind of faith does he have? Is he prepared to risk it all, to believe that something that may seem impossible to everyone around him is very much possible if the spirit is enabled? The man tells Jesus straight: "Lord, let me see again." He wouldn't go through all this and ask this if he didn't believe that maybe it could happen. And so it does. Jesus tells him: 'Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.'

Jesus' healings are never just about the body. It's about the whole person. Faith is about your whole being. You open yourself, you take action, you reach out, you engage because you want greater wholeness and you believe that greater wholeness is possible. Healing happens in all kinds of ways. The catalyst may be the action and power of an outside force. It may be the faith, hope and love of another person who draws out of you faith, hope and love you didn't know you had. It may be the invisible force or energy we name God... but unless we are engaged, nothing will happen for all the outside help. It's not magic. Unless we are very much part of the healing journey, it won't happen.

But this brings us to another question: What if for all the faith, hope and love in us, healing doesn't happen? Is that a failure on our part? Are we inadequate in our faith, hope or love? Is our prayer ineffective in drawing on divine healing power? Are we lacking the right kind of outside expertise or treatment? Or is it that we are also thinking of healing and wholeness in far too narrow terms?

Healing and wholeness are not just about finding ways to change what can be changed. Healing and wholeness are also about accepting what cannot be changed. The key is how we live out acceptance. How much are we engaged on our healing journey even when physically our situation will not improve? And how much does this journey of daily acceptance open up all kinds of other doors toward healing and wholeness? There are Beths and there are Veras and there are all of us in between. Beth is just fine physically. But mentally, emotionally and spiritually, she is sick. Vera, on the other hand, is dying physically. But she is flourishing in her inner being. Even as she is dying before having a chance to enjoy more time, she has reached the mountain top. What's her secret?

Let's zero in on our second reading for some revelatory insight. The prophet Jeremiah is offering prophetic words at a difficult time for his people and for himself. If anyone needs healing and wholeness it is them. Israel is surrounded by external enemies. The economy is awful and hope is dim. Many so-called prophets are offering palliatives like: "Things will get better. Just believe in yourselves. You can do it. God will smile on us all again. Our enemies will back away. Things will turn in our favour. Life will be sweet again. Vote for us..." But this is not the word that Jeremiah is receiving in his soul. Healing and wholeness cannot come if people aren't prepared to face truth, even when it is painful. Healing and wholeness cannot come if people aren't prepared to grow up and take responsibility. Healing and wholeness cannot come if people aren't prepared to take risks of faith. Healing and wholeness cannot come unless people focus on what is right in their soul regardless of the cost.

OK, preacher, let's break this down in bite size pieces... Jeremiah's Prophecy offers the people three revelatory steps to healing and wholeness:

1) Each step begins with the promise of new life: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel... with the seed of humans and the seed of animals." New seed will be sown and it will grow. Healing, wholeness and new life will come... In order for it to come, though, the people have to take responsibility for themselves and their journey of healing toward wholeness. Such responsibility has to involve facing up to the mistakes in their lives, how they have done harm intended or not, with negative consequences: "I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy and bring evil." Bad things happen through our mistakes, the mistakes of others or reasons beyond anything we can explain. But by bringing God into it, the prophet is declaring that nothing is irredeemable. When we take responsibility for our lives, it means we squeeze out positive meaning even from the negative experiences of life. Our greatest growth as persons in our development of resilience, character and positive ways we learn to care for others and understand them comes through and beyond the negative experiences in our own lives. Healing and wholeness has to involve taking charge of our lives rather than giving up and giving in to circumstances we cannot control. How we live it is something we can choose if we are inspired and empowered so to choose.

2) And this leads to the second point – taking responsibility for our own lives and our own healing and wholeness means we quit the self-defeating habit of blaming other people for our situations. Even though others may be very much the cause of many things in our lives, taking responsibility means we are empowered to "build and to plant" new life as the prophet declares. "No longer will we say: 'the parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.'" No. Now we each claim responsibility for our own lives. Rather than victims of the actions of others we become empowered actors of our own destinies, claiming responsibility for what we do with the cards we've been dealt. Not easy, especially if our life pattern has been one of helplessness in the face of larger circumstances beyond our control and blaming everyone and everything but ourselves.

2) And this brings us to the final revelatory words of divine prophecy: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel... I will put my law within them, and I will write it in their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people..." The

final stage of healing and wholeness is internalizing the kind of faith, hope and love fed to us so that it is no longer outside us, but lives within us. The law of love not only becomes the ground of our character, but such love also overflows into the world around us. We are no longer just desperate and needy recipients of the love of others, but rich sources of healing love for others ourselves. Our lives not only bear witness to healing... they become sources of it for others to feed on.

Beth was stuck in a pit. She was the victim of the actions of others, fearful of what she could not control, unable to take responsibility for her life, full of blame. She not only lived negativity in her soul, she spread negativity all around her. She desperately needed healing and wholeness even as she was physically well.

Vera, on the other hand, had discovered a source of faith, hope and love that was not destroyed in the face of debilitating realities all around her, including the collapse of her own body. And yet, these very debilitating realities were somehow turned into fuel for building up new possibilities for faith, hope and love. She claimed responsibility for her own life and her own choices given the cards she was dealt. She was no victim but an empowered actor, living abundance, able to bless and empower the world around her with the fullness that lived within her. Some call this magic. Some call this a miracle. According to the divine prophecy spoken through Jeremiah, the law of divine love was now written in her heart. According to Jesus: It was Vera's faith that channeled divine healing energy into her and through her to all who encountered her. Even as she was dying physically, she was already living the resurrection...

What about you and me? Where is the Beth or the Vera in us? What doors to healing and wholeness have been closed for us? Where do we need them opened? Where does the divine energy whom we name God fit in?

Let us pray: Speak to us, O God... speak to us your healing and wholeness... feed us with new faith, new hope and new love, so that we not only feel wholeness inside, but have it overflowing in a world broken and in desperate need of healing... Amen.