

Taking Each Other's Hands – Taking Jesus' Hand

Mark 1:29-39

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, (Feb. 20) 2022

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When I was a young pastor in my first year serving a church, I remember going to visit Dude Templeton, the matriarch of our little country congregation. She was in the hospital for the first time in her 85 years for gall bladder surgery. Even though she had 10 kids, all were birthed at home. She was nervous about the surgery and nervous about being in the hospital. At the end of our visit, as I had recently been taught, I asked if we might have prayer together and I asked what would she like for me to pray. She said, “Well, pray for my healing.” I thought to myself, “Oh, no. It has finally come to this – me praying for healing.” I had been reading lots of critical books on the Bible and theology, besides all of the abuses I had seen of evangelists and healing, so I had my doubts about healing. I said, “Mrs. Templeton, I’m not sure what I believe about healing.” She looked at me for a moment like I was from Mars, then sort laughed and said, “You just go ahead and pray for healing because we all know what we believe about it.”

In over 40 years of being a pastor part of what I’ve learned is that God’s work, including healing, is a lot bigger than simply what I individually believe or not. Mrs. Templeton knew something. When we doubt, the church affirms. The church’s faith across the centuries can handle my own struggles with such matters.

Southern writer Doris Betts has a novel entitled, *Souls Raised from the Dead*. The title came from a sign in a window of an old store in downtown Atlanta cleared by urban renewal: “Keys Made/ Knives Sharpened/ Palms Read/ Healing/

Souls Raised from the Dead.” I imagine someone coming into that store and saying to the clerk, “I need a couple of keys made, and a knife sharpened, and while I’m waiting, I need some healing and a soul raised from the dead. The clerk looks on nonchalantly and says, “Will there be anything else? Well, that’ll be \$17.95.”

The kingdom of God is about healing, and souls raised from the dead. We are a congregation focused by and large on the teaching and preaching part of our mission, and we believe strongly in the serving and caring parts, but this healing part makes us a little nervous.

But healing is part of the gospel, too. And it’s not incidental. Healing in the Bible and here in the Gospels is physical, emotional, spiritual, relational, communal, and political. Having your physical body cured of infirmities is just a little part of what all is going on with biblical healing.

Here in Mark 1 Jesus is healing right and left. In the passage just preceding our reading this morning, Jesus is in Capernaum in the synagogue where he is confronted with a man with an “unclean spirit.” Jesus heals him. Directly, Jesus leaves the synagogue and goes to Simon Peter’s house.

Parenthetically, I was at this very spot a dozen years ago. One of the emotionally and spiritually charged experiences I had in the Holy Land was when we stood in the excavated ruins of the synagogue in Capernaum. The very place Jesus had stood and preached. No doubts about the place. Then we walked out of the synagogue straightway to the house considered to be Simon Peter’s. It was about as far as it is from here to the road out front.

This house, which by the way, is about 30 or 40 yards from the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee was discovered in 1968 and excavated. What made it interesting is that there is evidence that from the middle of the first century this house might

have been a gathering place for Christians. Early on this house had taken on an importance for Christians at the time. So, scholars ask “Why was this house so important early on? Might it have been known as Simon Peter’s house?”

Anyway, Jesus goes to the house of Simon Peter and Simon Peter’s mother-in-law is sick in bed. Jesus goes into see her and takes her by the hand and heals her. And from our perspective, in a kind of amusing way she immediately gets up and starts serving everyone.

Notice that Mark says that Jesus took her hand and lifted her up. That’s explicit resurrection language – “lifted up.” Here was a soul raised from the dead.

From the perspective of early Christians, this was the model of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus: we are healed, souls raised from the dead, and in turn, we get up and serve others.

Then Mark tells us that evening at sundown, (in other words, after the Sabbath had concluded and it was permissible for people to travel further and do the work otherwise not permitted on the Sabbath) people brought all who were sick or possessed with demons. Everyone gathered outside the door and Mark says, “And he healed many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons.”

So here in short order, according to Mark, Jesus heals a possessed man in the synagogue, goes to Simon Peter’s house and heals Peter’s mother-in-law, and then spends the rest of the evening healing the sick and casting out demons.

Sounds like a full day. No wonder that early the next morning Jesus went out alone to a secluded place to pray and be with God.

So, what do we do with all this healing?

Wendell Berry reminds us, “The word ‘health,’ in fact, comes from the same Indo-European root as ‘heal,’ ‘whole,’ and ‘holy.’ To be healthy is literally to be whole; to heal is to make whole.” Berry goes on to say, “I believe that the community-in the fullest sense: a place and all its creatures-is the smallest unit of health and that to speak of the health of an isolated individual is a contradiction in terms”

In the Bible, while the word “health” is not used much, but “salvation” is used often and can be used interchangeably with health or wholeness. Both have to do with restoration and at-one-ment (atonement) with God and with others and with God’s creation. To be healed is to be made whole. Being cured may or may not be part of being healed.

The Power of Death is the opposite of healing, health, and wholeness. The Power of Death is that which dis-members us, cuts off, destroys, disintegrates, or isolates. The Power of Death has to do with everything from illnesses and diseases we have personally and diseases of our souls and emotions and spirit to this diseased old world that we’re intent on destroying. The Power of Death cuts us off from one another, from our place, and tries to cut us off from God – no matter if it is in the hospital bed or our relationships with one another, or with creation. Cancer isolates and dis-members us but so can addiction to screens, and any other kind of addiction.

Our call is to be healers in this world – heal the sick, raise souls from the dead, restore to relationship and community with God and others, prisoners in jail, the sick and dying, the left-out and marginalized, the poor and elderly, and care for the earth and all its creatures, work for peace, love the good, the beautiful, and the just.

We're about the work of healing when we feed people down at HOPE (Helping Other People Eat) and when we build tiny houses and help nurture community at Village Nac. We are healing when we sit down with one another and have good conversation, not simply about what we need to do this week, but conversation about our lives. We are healing when we confess our failures and sins to one another and forgive and receive forgiveness. We are healing when we stand together in a vigil or a march that speaks against injustice, against gun violence, against racism and White privilege.

There is a Hebrew phrase that is at the heart of what we're talking about: *tikkun olam*, which means "repairing the world."

But like Simon Peter's mother-in-law first we need to be healed. Our first calling is to take the hand of Jesus and be open to God's healing in our own lives.

Poet William Stafford speaks of those who "decline to be willingly fallible in order to find their way" (Kim Stafford, *Early Morning: Remembering My Father, William Stafford*, p. 63).

Sometimes we work so hard at being infallible that we are unable to find our way. Recognizing our fallibility, our failures, our weaknesses, our mortality is the first step in finding our way – in being healed. In other words, we need the humility to admit we're sick or we've failed, or we don't know all the answers. We have to be fallible enough to open our hands to God and to one another, admitting we cannot make it by ourselves. Sometimes when we think we're the victim is when we believe we're most infallible.

During Lent, we're going to be reading together Miroslav Volf's book, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a World Stripped of Grace*. Volf tells the story of Father Markovic, a Franciscan monk from Bosnia who was caught in the middle of the Bosnian War in the mid-1990's, in which Croats, Bosnians, and Serbs fought each other with unbelievable savagery and brutality. Neighbors who had known each other for decades turned on one another, each thinking they were the victim. Muslim Bosnians had massacred twenty-one men from Susanji, Father Markovic's home village. Nine of them were members of his family – all feeble senior citizens, innocent of any crimes, the youngest of whom was Father Markovic's seventy-one-year-old father.

In 1996, three years after the massacre, Father Markovic visited Susanji. Occupying the very house in which his brother used to live was a fierce Muslim woman who showed everyone she had a gun and knew how to use it, to protect her new home. Father Markovic was warned about her, but he went anyway.

As he approached the house, she was waiting for him, gun in hand, cigarette in her mouth, she hollered, "Go away, or I'll shoot you." Father Markovic responded in a gentle voice, "No you won't shoot me. You'll make a cup of coffee for me." They stood there for a moment, she glaring at him. After a bit, she put down her gun and went inside to the kitchen. Taking the last bit of coffee she had, she mixed in some already used grounds to make enough coffee for two cups. "And they, deadly enemies, began to talk as they partook in the ancient ritual of hospitality: drinking coffee together." Volf says that she told Markovic of her loneliness, of the home she had lost, of the son who never returned from the battlefield. After a long conversation, Markovic left. A month later he returned,

and she told him, “I rejoice at seeing you as much as if my son had returned home.”

Volf concludes, “Did they talk about forgiveness? I don’t know. And in a sense, it doesn’t matter.” And get this, Volf says, “He, the victim, came to her asking for her hospitality in his brother’s home, which she unrightfully possessed. And she responded. Though she greeted him with a rifle, she gave him a gift and came to rejoice at his presence. The humble, tenuous beginnings of a journey toward embrace were enacted through a ritual of coffee drinking. If the journey continues, it will lead through the difficult terrain of forgiveness” (pp. 190-191).

Though he was the victim, he opened his hands to her. And in so doing he discovered that she was a victim, too. Like Father Markovic was tempted to do, we tend to stay away, isolate, keep busy, because, after all, we didn’t start this.

This morning we are invited to be open our hands to receive mercy, to receive grace, to receive healing. We are invited to take the hand of Jesus, and we are invited to take the hand of the body of Jesus, each other’s hands.

In 1932 the African American composer Thomas Dorsey lost his wife while she was giving birth to their son and the next day, he lost the infant son. In the midst of the deep grief, he wrote: *Precious Lord, take my hand Lead me on, let me stand I am tired, I am weak, I am worn Through the storm, through the night Lead me on, to the light, Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.*

As you’ll recall, this song became Martin Luther King’s favorite song. He used to get Mahalia Jackson to sing it at some of the mass rallies in churches, and he would call her in the middle of the night to get her to sing it over the phone. In

fact, Dr. King's very last words, just before he was shot, while standing on the hotel balcony, he spoke to the musician who was going to play that night, "Ben, make sure you play "Take my hand precious Lord" in the meeting tonight. Play it real pretty." Of course, Mahalia Jackson sang it at Dr. King's funeral.

What Martin Luther King had learned, what Thomas Dorsey learned, and what Father Markovic learned, that like Simon Peter's mother-in-law, there are times when we are at the end of our ropes, and we must reach out and take Jesus' hand.

I remember John Claypool, who also suffered much, saying that God lives at the end of our ropes. Take his hand this morning.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.