

Community, Gratitude, and Healing

21st Sunday after Pentecost

Healing Prayer Service

October 9, 2016

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Texts: Jeremiah 29.1, 4-7;
 Psalm 66.1-12;
 2 Timothy 2.8-15;
 Luke 17.11-19

I cannot think of a timelier moment to have a service of prayer for healing than right now. For weeks we have been listening for God's Word in worship with (as Karl Barth put it) the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. It's been a rocky road with strong words of prophetic warning coming out of Jeremiah and equally fierce words of conviction coming from our Lord out of the gospel of Luke. When we weren't being confronted about our own complicity with injustice we were being drawn to grieve for the pain and the suffering of that injustice. It's not just the scriptures but the state of our world that has been pulling us into this heavy, difficult territory. Pastor Gordon last week took us even deeper to name within ourselves those places where we feel defeated in our efforts to be faithful; where the spirit of cowardice as 2 Timothy put it pulls at us tempting us to just throw our hands in the air and give up.

I have had multiple conversations lately with people who are wrestling with the futility of trying to make an impact on what seems like intractable, impossible situations. Whether it is in the realm of national politics – don't even get me started on the insanity of this past week in that realm – or whether it is the realm of personal relationships or the realm of social justice. Here's how I'd frame the question some of us are wrestling with in all these different dimensions: when so much is broken and has been for so long and when the causes of the problem are so complicated and so deeply entrenched, where can we find hope? What should we do? Is healing even possible?

That is the question of God's people in Jeremiah today. Everything they have known is gone. Their city has been destroyed, their homes are long gone, they are now living as exiles in a foreign land. Jeremiah writes to them a tender word (finally!); a word meant to shift their focus from the trauma of their past toward the hope of their future. His word to them is: Your healing will come from your investment in community.

They will find healing as they put down roots in the place where they find themselves; as they build houses and live in them. They will find healing as they reconnect with the earth and the rhythms of sustenance; as they plant gardens and eat what they produce. They will find healing as they give themselves again to the joy and pleasure of love and family; as they take wives and husbands, have children and give their children in marriage. His word to them is: You will find life again as you knit yourselves together in community.

The invitation to start over can feel daunting but it is also energizing. Over time what begins as grieving, which you need to do, can become something else. Replaying over and over again what went wrong, what has been lost, surveying the carnage; it can suck the life right out of you. What Jeremiah knew was that giving themselves to the energy of creation – envisioning and building what would come next – would pull them toward new life.

The last word he gave to them was absolutely essential. It had to do with how they would relate to the people who had destroyed their way of life. The contest between Babylon and Israel was over. Babylon won and they were living in the land of their enemies. Would they hold on to that rivalry praying for their demise, rooting for their destruction, and hoping for a chance to turn the tables? Jeremiah brings a very strong word from the Lord on that question and the answer is “NO”! The energy of re-creation demanded that they seek the welfare of the city: “Pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” I suppose this could be seen as just good, pragmatic advice along the lines of “a rising tide lifts all ships.” But I believe Jeremiah was speaking a more profound gospel truth in this last piece of advice than that. Our lives are interconnected

whether we feel those bonds of connection or not. When we intentionally strengthen those bonds of community we experience healing.

The gospel from Luke today gives to us a visual expression of this truth. When I think about what precisely needed healing in this story of the ten lepers, I find myself naming far more than the medical condition of these ten individuals Jesus encounters on the way to Jerusalem. When they call out to Jesus for mercy, he sends them to show themselves to the priests. It's kind of odd response. Why doesn't he just heal them right then and there? If he's going to send them somewhere, why the priests?

I suspect it is because the social isolation imposed on those with leprosy was as painful as the physical condition itself. The reason they were all hanging out together on the outskirts of the community was because they were quarantined by the priests who were the gatekeepers for who was clean and unclean, worthy or unworthy to be a part of the community. By the way this was not about containing infectious disease...this was social stigma in action buried under the guise of purity laws. There is no coincidence here that on their way to reclaiming their place within the communal life that they look down and notice that the sores on their bodies (the source of their alienation and shame) had suddenly cleared up and they were clean. Community and healing are deeply connected.

All of ten of these men are made clean but only one of them is said by Jesus to have been made well or whole and that was the one, the Samaritan, who returned to give thanks. From this simple expression of gratitude, Jesus deduces the depth this man's faith and it's his faith not the cure of his leprosy but his faith that has made him well. Somehow in this exchange Jesus is equating faith with gratitude. Or at least is saying that a faith that leads toward gratitude is what makes us well and whole...and I would add whether or not we experience a full on cure from the dis-ease that is afflicting us.

Which brings me back to the question with which we began: when so much is broken and has been for so long and when the causes of the problem are so complicated and so deeply entrenched, where can we find hope? What should we do? Is healing even possible? When I listen to these texts in light

of that question I begin to see some first steps emerging. Healing and community are deeply related. So anything I can do to strengthen the bonds of communal life is going to point me in the direction of healing. Any time we can draw someone who is hurting into small experience of community or any way we can knit ourselves back into the relationships that perhaps we have let fall to the side – we will be taking one more step in the direction we want to go.

Some of us in the Wednesday Fall Series are reading the book by Brian McLaren called *We Make the Road by Walking*. We don't know exactly how to get where we want to be and where God is calling us to be. But these texts point toward the steps to take and as we take them I trust we will be pointed toward the next steps and we will (as the title suggests) make the road by walking....together according to Jeremiah. The energy – the spirit – that will take us down the road according to Jesus is gratitude. Noticing the little gifts along the way and savoring those gifts. Taking the time to stop what we are doing when the little moments of grace or blessing come and giving our full attention to that moment. If there is a person on the other side of that grace or blessing even if we have to turn around and track back to them --- say “thank you.” When we lean into community when we let gratitude be the energy fuels us, there is hope and healing.

It helps tremendously to know that we do not walk alone. That we here in this community of faith, Hope Church, we walk together. And there are many, many communities who walk with us. This week I have been greatly encouraged – I have felt hope rising within me – as I have listened many times this week to a piece of music that Bruce tenHaken shared with several of us put out by the 92nd Street Y in NYC¹. This past week was Rosh Hashanah which is the Jewish New Year (this is a Jewish Y in NYC). What they did was commission this piece of music and then recorded it with Rabbis and cantors and choirs from around the country. It's prayer and blessing for the new year. I'm going to share a piece of it with us now as our prayer for blessing as a reminder of where God is leading us and the many gifts that accompany us on the way. Let us pray.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHILYhYNbc0&feature=youtu.be>