

## Wesley United Methodist Church

October 13, 2013

"Hold On to God's Promises."

Luke 17:11-19

There is an old, old story about a traveling evangelist who also advertised himself as a faith healer. In one of his crusade services he jumped on the platform and said, "I have faith that two people will be healed tonight. Where are you?" he asked. "Who would like to be healed?" A man ran down the aisle, named Harry. Asked what his ailment was, Harry said he had a lisp. He explained sadly, "I can't talk wite." He was instructed to go behind a curtain. Another man hobbled down on crutches. His name was Frank. He said, "I haven't walked in 20 years without crutches." He was told to go behind the curtain with Harry. Then the healer said, "Frank, you've been healed. Slide those crutches out under the curtain one at a time." Slowly, the crutches appeared under the curtain, and the crowd went crazy. The healer held up the crutches and broke them over his knee. Everyone cheered! Then dramatically he declared that Harry was healed of his speech impediment too. The evangelist said: "Harry, the next sentence you speak will be the first you've ever said normally." Then he said, "Usher, take him a microphone." After he was certain Harry had the microphone the evangelist asked, "What do you like to say, Harry?" There was a moment of silence. Then from behind the curtain came these words, "Fwank fell down!"

I don't know how you feel about faith healing. I suspect that as a business, a very profitable business, God despises it. Showy crusades and shallow evangelists have brought a deep stain on the authentic work of Christ in the world. Yet healing is very much a part of the story of the church. Long before there were MRIs and the miracles of modern medicine, there were humble pastors as well as devoted lay people bowing their heads in prayer asking God to bring healing to someone who was afflicted with illness and broken with pain and watching as ever so often healing would come. Not every time, of course, but often enough so that the tradition has continued from the early days of our faith until the twenty-first century.

Our scripture for today from Luke's gospel is a case of the healing power of faith. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. He was traveling along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" Notice how desperate these men were. Leprosy was the most terrible disease of Jesus' day; it was greatly feared. It was disfiguring and sometimes fatal. People in Bible times associated leprosy with sin. Surely the person who was afflicted, or perhaps his parents, had done something terrible to deserve such an awful disease.

The leper himself was considered unclean physically and spiritually. He could not approach within six feet of any person including his own family members. We read in Leviticus 13:45: "His clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, 'Unclean, unclean.'"

There person with leprosy was judged by society to be dead the living dead, sort of like zombies. However, the person with leprosy was alive. Nevertheless he had to wear a black garment so he could be recognized as from among the dead. He was banished as an outcast, totally ostracized from society earthly and heavenly. Again from Leviticus, "All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be" (13:46). He could not live within the walls of any city; his dwelling had to be outside the city gates.

He was thought to be polluted, incurable by any human means whatsoever. Leprosy was thought to be curable only by God. One reason people believed in Jesus as the Messiah was that he healed people with leprosy.

Imagine the anguish and heartbreak of these people with leprosy, completely cut off from family and friends and society. Imagine the emotional and mental pain. Ten men with leprosy met Jesus as he was entering the city, coming from a long journey. The lepers had no idea where Jesus was going. He could have been heading for an important meeting, or he could have been tired and exhausted, or he could have had no time for interruptions; but the lepers didn't care. They were so desperate they would interrupt him no matter what. They stood at a distance as the law demanded and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"

Have you ever been that desperate for Christ's healing touch, either for yourself or for someone you love? Some of us have. This can be a cruel world. Good people can be afflicted in terrible ways. The pain is not always physical. Sometimes it is mental or emotional pain.

Emotional pain can be more devastating than physical pain. I know parents who are desperate over their inability to reach a son or a daughter with an alcohol or drug problem. I know couples who are desperate to heal their marriage. When we talk about healing faith, this faith covers a multitude of situations. A multitude of people in this community, in this city, around the world are crying out like these ten men with leprosy, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"

Jesus did more than have pity. When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were healed. They were cleansed of their leprosy. This is a word of hope for us in our seasons of desperation. Christ hears our pleas as well as theirs. Christ is available to us as well as to them. And Christ still heals.

There was a woman who was in the final stages of a terminal illness. A kind visitor from the church would come to see her from time to time. One day, the ill woman stood in front of her living room window and said, "It feels like God is completely shut out from my life." And in symbolic nature, she slammed the curtains closed. Her friend kindly responded, "Just because you closed the curtains, doesn't mean that the sun isn't still shining." Just because we do not experience God's presence doesn't mean God has forgotten us.

Peter Marshall who was a dynamic preacher in the 1940s once said, "When the clock strikes for me, I shall go, not one minute early, and not one minute late. Until then, there is nothing to fear. I know that the promises of God are true, for they have been fulfilled in my life time and time again. Jesus still teaches and guides and protects and heals and comforts, and still wins our complete trust and our love." Peter Marshall died suddenly of a heart attack on the morning of January 25, 1949 at the age of 46. Peter Marshall was right. It doesn't matter whether you die at 46 or 106, the promises of God are sure. God knows our needs and heals us according to those needs.

Healing faith is the conviction that even though our circumstances are dire, there is a loving God who watches over us and if we will trust him, healing will come. It may not come as quickly as we would desire. It may not even come in the way we desire, but if we are steadfast we will see the salvation of our God.

How many times have you looked back over your life and realized that situations you thought were hopeless were not hopeless at all? Even though you could not see a solution at the time, life worked out and you realize now that God used that hopeless situation in a wonderful way to make you what you are today. With the help of God your mess became a masterpiece. Your burden became a blessing. You thought you were at the end of your rope, but you were only at the beginning of a new reality. The key is to hold on to God's promises. Jesus instructed the men

with leprosy to show themselves to the priests. This was to witness their healing. But it was also key to their healing. They were cleansed as they obeyed Christ's command. Christ tells us to trust him, to continue living a life of faith. By doing so we, too, will experience his healing power at work.

Healing is not about a circus tent with sawdust on the floor and a carnival-like atmosphere where sick people are called upon to come on stage to experience a mystical experience. Healing faith is about holding on and trusting God and waiting for God's salvation. And one thing more: It is about developing a sense of gratitude along the way. You know how this story ends. One of the ten men whom Jesus healed of this terrible disease, when he saw he was healed, came back to Jesus, threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. Luke notes that this grateful man was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Where not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?"

The man who had the most reason to feel rejected was the most thankful. The man was a Samaritan, or in Jesus' description, a foreigner. "Foreigner" comes from a Greek word that means he was not only a foreigner within the bounds of a country to which he did not belong, but he was also, in the eyes of the Jews, a foreigner "from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12). Perhaps this is why he was the only one of the ten who returned. His was the greater gratitude. He had felt his need more keenly than the rest. Despite the fact that he had never known the real promises of God and that he had been without God in this world, he now knew God and it was more than his heart could contain. He broke forth in joy to give glory to God. Jesus had saved him from so much.

It is then Jesus says to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." Notice those words: "your faith has made you well" means literally, "your faith has saved you." The man was not only physically healed but emotionally and spiritually as well. This is the meaning of salvation. It means being made whole in every respect.

Ten desperate men with the most dreaded disease of that day. One was more desperate than the others, for he was a foreigner. All were healed physically. Perhaps they all were spiritually healed as well. We only know for certain that one was spiritually healed, the one who came back to Jesus to say thanks.

How about you this day? Do you have need for healing for your body, healing for your marriage, healing for your emotions? A good place to begin is to thank Jesus for the good things he's placed in your lives already. And to go forth from this place holding onto his promise that he will never forsake you. And eventually, I don't know when, I don't know where, I don't know under what circumstances, but eventually, if you walk with God and trust him, someday you will be made whole. Amen.