

“Healing in Community”
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This Lenten season we have been journeying together with a shared commitment to focus intentionally on the notions of healing and recovery. On Ash Wednesday we began by taking on “the yoke” of responsibility as disciples of Jesus to be the Body of Christ—a body of those who need healing and offer healing in the world.

In the first week of Lent, we began by focusing on the need to recover physical health. In the second week of Lent, we were reminded that we cannot be personally healed until we see the interconnected community as part of the process of healing and thus, we considered economic health. In the third week of Lent, we acknowledged the power of truth-telling and sharing stories as we focused on the importance of recovery of mental health. In the fourth week of Lent, we noted that prolonged times of difficulty can impede our ability to stay creative and we implored the Great Healer to awaken us from our sleep with God’s touch of inspiration. Last week, we focused on the call to discipleship and the demands of Jesus on us—that Jesus wants something from us—he wants us to follow him to the other side so that we can join him in what he is up to all around us.

So, let me ask you, what have you been learning about “recovery” from our series and from these amazing healing stories in Matthew’s gospel? What passion has been piqued in our church that we can offer to our community beyond this moment as we continue to participate in the revival of the spirit of humanity? How will we address ongoing pain, ourselves “healed and yet still healing”? Some of you may think I’m asking these questions just because I need some words to say in my sermon. Please hear me loud and clear. I’m asking these questions because I desperately want us to consider how our church can find new and innovative ways to be a health hub of some kind for our community. There are so many exciting and inspiring ideas. I’ve shared them with our Lenten study group, and I’ve shared some of them in some of my Lenten sermons and with the Session. I’ve been asking these questions and sharing inspiring ideas because I believe Westminster Presbyterian Church is called both to experience greater healing and to offer healing to our community. I believe that is why you called me to serve you as your pastor as you move to implement your hopes for revitalization.

Next week is Easter and we will joyfully enter into a season of joy and hope, daring to dance again, with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But today, as we prepare to enter Holy Week, I want to issue this challenge: let us beware of the temptation to simply play at being the church. Let us not be one more church that exists more for the comfort of its members than for the world that God loves. Let us instead recommit ourselves to becoming the healers by integrating our beliefs and actions together for the health of the whole.

Sometimes we are tempted to think of our faith in Jesus as whatever personal, private beliefs we hold about him. Maybe we think of our relationship with Jesus, our prayer life, our trust in him as we journey through life. Today's story invites us to reconsider how we understand our faith in Jesus.

Right from the start of this story, we learn that Jesus was able to see the faith of the paralytic and those who brought him to Jesus. Their faith could be seen---by Jesus. How do we express our faith in Jesus? Can Jesus see it? This story shows us that faith in Jesus is expressed through a combination of words and deeds or deeds alone. In other words, faith is not simply trusting in Jesus' ability to provide help, it actually means doing something---seeking out Jesus for help with concrete actions.

And that is connected to something else we discover about faith from this story: we express our faith not just in seeking our own healing but in helping others in their moment of need through concrete actions. Those who bring the paralytic to Jesus are expressing their faith in Jesus through their actions of carrying him. Friends, this means that Jesus' healing comes to communities who demonstrate their faith in Jesus by actions that support not just their own healing but the healing of those around them. Westminster, who in our communities are we carrying to Jesus? Who are we supporting in concrete and intimate ways? To carry someone implies relationship and trust.

Some of the power of this story also comes from what Jesus is able to do. Jesus not only brings physical healing, but spiritual healing, too. Not only can Jesus cure us from physical ailment, Jesus can heal us from sin. There is nothing we can do or say, nothing in the realm of humanity, that is beyond the saving grace of Jesus. The paralytic is a whole person and Jesus cares for him holistically. As the Son of Man, the Human One, Jesus has been given the authority from God not only to defeat evil by casting out demons, calming storms, and more, but also to forgive sins. In Matthew's gospel, the entire ministry of Jesus, in fact, can be summed up as saving people from their sins. But the forgiveness that Jesus offers is not only bestowed once and for all, it is also something that is lived out on a daily basis.

But here is the other powerful element of forgiveness in this story. Forgiveness is an experience and practice that is lived out in community. Notice in vs. 8 that Matthew ends this story by drawing our attention to the church. The same authority to forgive that is given by God to the Son of Man is the authority that God gives to the people. You see, the Son of Man's authority to forgive is valid wherever he is and he is "with" his followers when they gather in his name. Church---we can forgive sins, we can foster holistic healing in community, when and as Jesus is with us. If this beautiful truth makes you afraid, you are in good company with the bystanders in this story who could see this reality playing out before them. So, in the face of our real fear at the authority for holistic healing God shares with us as Jesus is with us, let us do this: like the bystanders, may we, too, glorify God.

Sin and sickness both appear in this story not because one leads to the other but because both are products of the human condition. So, too, forgiveness and healing are related not as cause and effect but as mutually occurring manifestations of God's realm breaking in on earth as it is in heaven. In community, with each other, and with Jesus, we are given the

authority to participate in the healing that is characteristic of God's way. So let us understand that healing and forgiveness are not the end of the story but the beginning. Jesus is drawing us deeper into the drama of God's story and transformation of all creation. In community, let us pursue a life of faith and action. Let us move from healing and wholeness to ministry and testimony. May Jesus see our collective faith. May we be so bold as to carry others to Jesus and to enter into the authority to forgive and heal that Jesus has for us as his followers. Amen.