

16th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Track 2—Sept. 9, 2018

St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland. Jim O'Grady

Isaiah 35:4-7a, Psalm 146, James 2:1-17, Mark 7:24-37

“The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” To the biblically literate, or the church-going Christian, those are familiar scripture verses. In our shared worship, we hear them every few years as summer ends, as well as during Advent. They echo with the joy of return from exile, with the exuberance of a journey from slavery to freedom, with the hope of a promised one who will reconcile a people to their source. Perhaps with our generally comfortable, stable, 21st century, first world lives, the words of Isaiah don't carry the weight for us that they did for his original audience. After all, real slavery, exile, and profound alienation are unlikely sources of woundedness for us who are gathered in this place.

It's not that healings don't happen in our world, and that we don't witness and are awed by them. I'm sure many of you have watched online video clips which show the first time a person hears the voice of a loved one, or sees the world literally with new eyes. Viewers are often moved by watching these events, and along with the healed persons, feel a sense of joy and amazement.

All of our scripture readings today speak of healing. The physical healings recounted in Mark's gospel are certainly the most dramatic, but there are equally significant spiritual, inner healings—actual, implied, and potential.

The man who was the inspiration for the first 39 chapters of the book of Isaiah prophesied during a time of crisis for his nation: Judah's greatness and prosperity were coming to an end; the shadow of conquest lay over the land. But there was

a crisis more serious than that posed by an invading empire. Greed, hypocrisy, and injustice were weakening the spiritual integrity of Judah. When leaders colluded with foreigners to accommodate their gods or used the God of David to justify national wrongdoing, the prophet spoke words of condemnation. While Isaiah was convinced that God was about to strike down the nation in judgment, he never believed it would be utterly destroyed, or that God's promises would be canceled. Today's reading is meant to be a message of consolation and hope for a tiny remnant returning from a long, bitter exile. For Isaiah, salvation for a nation or a people had to be linked to repentance and conversion. Such faith would see a descendent of David raised up to replace faithless leaders with one who rules in peace and justice [Frederick L. Moriarty, SJ].

The psalmist presents us with a similar dialogue between human pride and divine care: "Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth, for there is no help in them." It is rather the Lord who "gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous; the Lord cares for the stranger; he sustains the orphan and the widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked." But this is more than a matter of "God will provide"; our translation says that God "keeps his promise forever"; or more plainly, God "always does what God says." This phrase gives us insight into the ministry of Jesus and into the healings presented in the gospel, evidence that God's kingdom is more than spoken promises.

As a faithful Jew, Jesus of course was in dialogue with the Hebrew scriptures. In Luke's gospel, Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, unrolls a scroll of the book of Isaiah in the Nazareth synagogue, and reads: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." In a scene almost

cinematic in nature, he then rolls up the scroll and, with the eyes of everyone fixed on him, he states that “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

But God’s kingdom breaks into human life in actions, not simply in words. In Matthew’s gospel, the imprisoned John the Baptist sends some of his disciples to ask if Jesus is the promised one. In an echo of Isaiah, Jesus makes his response— “Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the poor have good news brought to them.” Unlike the leadership of Israel and Judah, the kingship Jesus proclaims is not one of angry judgment; neither is it an empire whose goal is to dominate nations, nor is it based on threatened wars of extermination. Instead, it is a kingdom dedicated to the healing of wounds and the bestowal of blessings [John L. McKenzie, STD].

Narratives of the miracles of Jesus, including healings, make up a substantial portion of the first nine chapters of Mark’s gospel. We’ve been hearing several of those accounts during our Sunday liturgies for much of this year. The tradition of Greco-Roman wonder-workers and magicians was fairly common in the centuries before Jesus. In fact, the structure of many of those stories mirrors the gospel accounts of the healings of Jesus. Because of this, some scripture scholars in the past doubted the historical reality of the gospel healings.

There are crucial differences, though. The miracles of Jesus were always compassionate responses to people in need that included a human contribution, a human component. In other words, for Jesus, divinity was never a shortcut around humanity [Fr. Michael G. Ryan]. In the healings, the human contribution was in part the faith of those being cured. Jesus acts where faith is present, and draws forth a deepening of faith. Mark writes that where faith was lacking, the distress Jesus felt was such that he was incapable of healing. He wants to help the

other person, there's no self-interest at work. He heals not to draw attention to himself, but to herald the kingdom of a loving God, who wants to heal the wounds of exclusion and rejection.

Chris Breuninger reminded us of this in July when he preached on the gospel account of Jesus healing a woman who had suffered with hemorrhages for twelve years. Her condition had stigmatized her as "unclean," and placed her outside the religious community. Jesus was unique in that his wonder-working didn't merely confirm his message of inclusion and acceptance, but carried it. Word did not exist without deed; the God who acts is the God who speaks [Raymond E. Brown, SS].

We see this at work in both the healing stories of today's gospel. In the first, we have the only gospel account of Jesus meeting a gentile woman. She's from a traditionally pagan region, but has clearly heard of Jesus, of the words and deeds which manifest God's love for creation. Her request for healing for her daughter was made with the sincerest of intentions and trust in Jesus' power to respond. Readers and hearers of this passage often find his initial response to be puzzling, even shocking. Based on the woman's status as a non-Jew, Jesus refers to her group as dogs. I've heard his response explained as a way to test her faith. More than a few scripture scholars believe that what some consider scandalous may stem from a failure to acknowledge Jesus as a first century Jew, that is, that his ministry was firstly to the Jewish people.

But I don't think pointing out that Jesus was a man of his time is a sufficient explanation for his actions or for the actions of anyone. The wounds from such sins as white supremacy, slavery and racism, anti-Semitism, second-class status for women, and hatred of sexual minorities began to be healed only when a few lone voices refused to be defined by the times in which they lived.

Of course, in the context of his ministry, Jesus must be given credit for venturing into gentile territory in the first place. His mission confirmed the insights of Isaiah. In the aftermath of the return from exile, Israel's relationship with God was to be extended to the entire world. Making Israel great again would not mean threatening to inflict fire and fury on one's enemies, but rather would mean channeling a covenant of peace for all peoples.

Even so, Jesus' initial approach to the woman demonstrates the difficulty of standing up to the conventional wisdom of one's time. To her great credit, that brave woman was not put off by his words. She refuses to be defined or limited by her environment. Her resistance is clever but pointed, partially compelled by anger, serving to push Jesus beyond the limits of his culture. And in response, we see him rising above his time and place, with a recommitment to making his actions match his message of healing. He must have recognized that not to do so would hinder the working of God and the coming of God's kingdom. More words were unnecessary at this point—his brief reply was made out of a desire that the woman know that at that very moment, her daughter has been cured. In his dialogue with the woman, Jesus himself may have experienced a healing of attitude.

If the son of God recognized his need of healing, how much more should we know our need for healing. Modern medicine can often deal effectively with our physical wounds and maladies, even conditions we were born with or have long lived with. The more insidious wounds lie in our attitudes, in the judgments we cast on others. Perhaps none of us believe ourselves to be racist or prejudiced against members of a different social group than the one we belong to. But we come close when our view of others is consistently made through lenses of race, ethnicity, gender, class, or partisan politics. Even casual thoughts or comments about a person's appearance—what's inaccurately called "shaming" in popular

culture—prevent us from a compassionate look into the lives of individuals as persons.

The recent death of retired Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen reminded me of what compassion looks like in a relationship. Some of you may recognize the name George Kotolaris. He and his mother Pansy would often show up uninvited at church and social gatherings around Seattle. To put it mildly, George was an eccentric. I was present at several services where he popped up and snapped photos of the proceedings with a cheap flash camera, occasionally making inappropriate comments in a loud, high-pitched Elmer Fudd-like voice. Archbishop Hunthausen befriended George, on occasion driving him home from events where the Archbishop had been present. At one point, the Archbishop became aware that George was about to be evicted from his apartment, which was becoming unlivable due to the junk George had accumulated. The Archbishop arrived as part of a cleaning crew. As George recounted later, “Hunthausen cleaned up my apartment. He was down on his hands and knees, mopping up my kitchen, the bathroom, the toilet, everything.”

Episcopal priest Carol Ludden, who started a ministry at Pike Place Market, wrote that George could be “maddening at times, slightly devious at others.” When he showed up at church events, some people would shun him or ask him to leave. Rev. Ludden writes that one day, George engaged her in conversation on a boring topic. She was about to cut him off when he mentioned that he had seen Archbishop Hunthausen that day. George said that they had walked together for awhile, and that the Archbishop was kind to him. At that moment, Rev. Ludden writes, “I stopped to listen.” Two experiences of healing: in one, a walk with a kindly shepherd of the church, in the other, a decision to listen to a man familiar with rejection—healing experiences for both George Kotolaris and for Carol Ludden.

The author of the Letter of James knew of such things when he wrote about acts of favoritism, about making distinctions among people and showing partiality. Such behavior wounds the body of Christ, and so compels the author to ask the self-appointed judges in his audience if they even believe in Jesus Christ—strong words indeed. “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” Or, as The Message bible has it, “isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?” Where faith is absent or insincere, healing cannot happen.

Faith had to have been present in that second healing in today’s gospel, not that you would necessarily know it from the telling. The unnamed deaf man is brought to Jesus by others. After he’s healed, we’re told nothing of his response, or what his new ability to speak plainly would mean for his life. But Jesus anticipates the response of the people, as he asks them—in vain as it turns out—not to tell anyone about the healing. The more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘he has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’”

Perhaps their astonishment is like the response some have to those viral videos of people hearing for the first time. Lilit Marcus, an editor and travel writer—and the child of deaf parents—has written about the popularity of the videos. She points out that they are often intense, private moments taken out of context; “sometimes we don’t even learn [the] names” of the individuals shown. She believes the clips are not about the people who are in them, but are about the people who watch them. To quote her: “It’s much easier to look at a 60-second ‘uplifting’ video and tear up and feel really good about yourself for sharing a post to Facebook than it is to learn anything about the lives of deaf individuals around the world.” She makes the point that a device such as a cochlear implant is not a miracle cure-all, and that videos that make it look so “do a disservice to the many deaf people who think that their lives are plenty inspiring just the way they are.”

We live in a society where most people no longer believe that physical or mental challenges are the result of personal sin or satanic power. We take for granted that surgical interventions and drug therapies can significantly help with such conditions. I think we're less enlightened when it comes to recognizing that hearts and minds are the entities more in need of healing. We seem to be living in a time and place where some people revel in condemnation and judgment, at times with the most detestable of words and actions. I hope we can all avoid giving in to that kind of temptation. Injuries are inflicted when we fail, in ways large and small, to live up to the fine words we proclaim as Christians. The potential for healing our wounded world will only be present when we speak words of encouragement and live lives of hope. The psalmist praised God's care for the oppressed, the hungry, prisoners, the blind, those who are bowed down, the righteous, the orphan, and the widow. This care in fact summarizes provisions for the poor and dispossessed that are enshrined in Torah law and preached by the prophets.

What does this healing care look like in today's world? It must be distressing for some of those in need—refugees and the homeless are just two examples—to be blamed for the circumstances in which they find themselves. Our response to the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus must be more than an attitude of "God helps those who help themselves," or "let go and let God."

Resisting that attitude was on the mind of John F. Kennedy 57 years ago as he delivered his inaugural address to a global audience divided by ideology. It may not surprise you to know that he also quoted Isaiah, and challenged all nations to "undo the heavy burdens . . . (and) let the oppressed go free." Kennedy challenged adversaries to "explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us." All of humanity, no matter the belief system, must struggle to be healed of the wounds of tyranny, poverty, disease and war, "rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation," as Kennedy echoes the Letter to the Romans. He acknowledged that ensuring a world "where the strong are just and

the weak secure and the peace preserved” would not be achieved easily or quickly. The failures in his three-year presidency and in those that have followed would prove his point. But I would like to leave you with the memorable, challenging conclusion of Kennedy’s famous speech. He reminded his listeners that in our efforts to heal and be renewed, we rely on God’s blessing and help. But we have to do so fully aware that “here on earth, God's work must truly be our own.”