

## “A Ministry of Healing”

Luke 17:11-19

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I like it that Jesus didn't have an office. He didn't sit in an office waiting for the world to come to him. He chose, instead, to be out there on the street, by the lake, in the market, at the bus stop, near the Post Office, in the coffee shops, in the unemployment lines. His style was to meet people where they lived and where they hurt and where they struggled. Lepers would never have found their way to his office. They were not allowed anywhere near the general public. So, it is as they are walking along a country lane that they encounter Jesus. The healing takes place in an unlikely setting.

Theologically speaking, the church is the body of Christ. We are Christ's body. We are his hands and his feet. Thus, a healing ministry must extend beyond the walls of a church building, out into the community and beyond. Healing does sometimes occur here in our building: at an AA meeting, at a choir practice, at a prayer meeting. But many who need to experience a healing don't often find their way to a church. Like the lepers in the story for today, their wounds tend to isolate them. So, a church that feels called to be a healing presence in the community has to find ways to be “out there” in the community.

Jesus was neither a medical doctor nor a psychiatrist. Yet, he was a healer. He had a way of being present to people such that they knew they were being heard. They knew they were being valued. They knew they were not being rejected by yet another judgmental comment. They knew he was not afraid of them.

In his presence, many who were wounded, who had lost self-esteem, who had forfeited self-respect, who had lost the community's trust, found a miraculous healing, an unprecedented restoration to relationships, and a re-birth of dignity. You might say that in Christ's presence, they found their souls again.

So, I am enthusiastic about taking the healing ministry of the church to the highways and bi-ways, to the assisted living centers, to places where homeless people gather, to animal shelters, to prisons, to support groups of all kinds. I am enthusiastic about our church having a healing presence in the community and beyond.

You may or may not know about our Visitation Ministry team. About a dozen women and men devote themselves to offering a Christ presence to anyone and everyone who finds themselves temporarily or more permanently disconnected from the church family, disconnected from the abundance of life, or maybe disconnected from what had been familiar. Theirs is a healing ministry because they offer that loving presence we associate with Jesus.

You may or may not know about our Salmon Brook Ministry team. A half dozen women and men plan and lead worship at Salmon Brook Convalescent Home each month, interacting with residents, bringing a Christ light to a sheltered community. This, too, is a healing ministry.

Theologically speaking, the church is Christ's body in the world. As he offered a healing presence, we, too, are to offer this kind of presence.

Last Tuesday afternoon, I conducted a burial service for an old friend at the Rose Hill Cemetery. The grief was thick and the tears flowed freely.

I'm sure my words were helpful to some, but what I witnessed there, at the grave, was about 50 people hugging each other, leaning on each other, sharing handkerchiefs, holding hands, and kissing cheeks. What I was witnessing was a healing ministry; not an organized ministry team, but a spontaneous offering of what I simply call a Christ presence. It was so powerful that no one wanted to leave! And when we did eventually leave, we all felt a kind of healing, a kind of hopefulness.

The lepers in Luke's story were desperate. They had been to the hospitals and clinics. They had not experienced anything like a healing. They each wore a cow bell around their neck to warn approaching pedestrians that people with a contagious disease were coming near. These lepers were cut off from the rest of community life. They were isolated, quarantined, exiled. They weren't invited to play pickle ball or to attend the local square dance, or to be advisors in the scout troop. When they see Jesus from afar, they cry out to him, "Master, have mercy on us." They don't need to mention their diagnosis, for that is obvious. Neither do they cry out for a miracle cure. They cry out for mercy, for someone to regard them as human beings, for someone not to be afraid of them, for someone to care.

In my view, what happens in this story is that Jesus meets them where they are, offers them a loving presence such as they have not experienced in their lifetime, and that this loving presence makes all the difference. Instantly, they see themselves differently. The healing has begun. By the time they reach the temple, these lepers have found the wholeness they had been seeking.

This story may or may not have taken place in exactly the way Luke records it. One can take the story quite literally and understand it as a miracle of Jesus cleansing ten lepers.

Or, one can see this story as Luke's invitation to the churches then and to the churches now to be the body of Christ in the world by offering a Christ-presence: a loving, non-judgmental presence. For, there are lepers in our modern world. We give them different names: illegal immigrants, foreigners, bearers of sexually transmitted diseases, homeless people, people who stand at busy intersections holding signs that say, "Will work for food," etcetera. The need for a healing ministry persists. It may require a newly appointed ministry team, or it may simply require an unofficial team of one, one person who chooses to be a Christ-presence to another. It makes all the difference.

Thinking back over all the years, I can identify a number of people who have been a Christ-presence to me, people who heard my often, unspoken cry for mercy, and found a way to be a healing presence for me. I think of Ray Brown, my junior varsity high school basketball coach. In this one game, I was failing to score in every possible way. I was letting the team down. Teammates had stopped passing me the ball! My hook shot missed the rim. My lay-ups ricocheted off the backboard. Even my free throws missed the mark. I was in the basketball blues. Mr. Brown called a timeout. We huddled around him as he plotted out an inbound play which included a pick and a pass and a screen. It was sure to create an open shot for me, a shot I couldn't possibly miss. I don't even remember whether I made the shot or not! It doesn't matter! I just remember Mr. Brown meeting me where I was, recognizing my plight, and offering me the kind of affirmation I can only describe now as a Christ-presence. This was certainly not as dramatic as Jesus healing the ten lepers. But it meant the world to me at the time. Mr. Brown is now in the school's athletic hall of fame. I attended his induction ceremony. I see him every once in a while at reunions. And I remember to thank him for that ten second timeout when he met me in my darkness, when he heard my cry for mercy.

You and I are Christ's body. We are his hands and his feet. He has no one else. When we step up to this truth, the whole world lives in the greatest of hope. Amen.