

“Getting to Jesus: Some Thoughts on Healing...”
Lent 2015: I'm Not Okay
Sermon on Mark 2:1-12 (2/28 & 3/1/15)
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One of the first sermons I ever preached was on the reading we just heard from Mark chapter two. It was in my first year of seminary, on the second day of the preaching class I took during the Spring semester.

I preached what I believe was a 3-minute message on this reading as part of an exercise in extemporaneous preaching. You know: very little prep time, no notes... just being given a Scripture reading and then maybe two minutes to come up with something to say about it before standing in front of our class and preaching.

It was, quite possibly, one of the most terrifying assignments I'd ever been given in all my years of schooling.

See, I love words. *I love words*. I spend a lot of time and energy thinking through how I'm going to put words on a page – especially words that someone else is going to read or hear. I want those words to be clear, intelligible, meaningful, gracious, and challenging.

Doing that takes time and a lot of intentionality. It also requires me to use a nearly word-for-word manuscript when I preach. I always have and I probably always will. I knew that going into my seminary preaching class...so, being asked to preach a mini-sermon with very little prep time and with *no* notes was awful. //

One of the reasons I like to be so careful about my words is that, sometimes, when I'm *not* careful, I say things I don't mean to say:

I'm more cruel than I intend to be...or sticky-sweet platitudes come out of my mouth that I don't really believe – things that *sound* nice, but either don't actually mean much of anything or, worse, they mean something I do not intend to communicate.

As I'm sure we are all aware, words can either give life or they can tear down. They have the power to bring strength and meaning...they also have the power to anger and to alienate. Especially when words are given in the midst of difficult times.

When we are struggling in any of the myriad ways we can struggle in this life, if someone says just the *right* thing, a weight is lifted...we breathe a little easier. Likewise, when we are struggling and someone says the *wrong* thing, it only adds to our struggles.

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A week and a half ago, on Ash Wednesday, we began a new sermon and worship series here at McCabe – a series called “I’m Not Okay.” We got the title and concept for this series from Embrace Church, one of our sister United Methodist congregations in Sioux Falls...and this series is so appropriate for Lent.

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The 40-day season of Lent is a journey toward the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter Sunday. Lent is a time when we seek forgiveness for the sin that nailed Jesus to the cross. It's also a time when we seek God's guidance and presence in the midst of our own brokenness.

I have said it before in this series, and I will keep saying it: we humans are fragile...life on earth is messy and complex – filled with joy and sorrow, excitement and disappointment. When people ask us how we are, so often we instinctively reply with a simple, “I’m okay. Everything is fine.” Even when we are *not* okay and even when everything is *not* fine.

Lent is a perfect time for us to prayerfully and intentionally reflect on the ways in which we are *not* okay. And, of course, Lent is a perfect time for us to put before God all that makes us “not okay.”

Because we worship a God who is with us in our brokenness...we follow a Savior who took our brokenness upon himself on the cross...and, by our Savior's resurrection from the dead, God declares to us that there is *hope* in all things. That, even when we are not okay – we *will* be...eventually.

On Ash Wednesday, we talked about temptation. Last week we thought about what it means to trust God – to relax into the assurance of God's love for us – even in the midst of serious doubt and faith questions.

Today the theme is sickness and healing...next week we'll dive into worry and fear over the future...after that, we'll look at how we so easily judge ourselves and others...we'll talk about loss and grief.

There are so many ways in which we are *not* okay. And if you discover anything throughout this series, I hope it's that, when you are *not* okay, you are welcome here. When we come here for worship, we should come prepared to bring *all* that we are Jesus: all of our gratitude, all of our confession, all of our pain, all of our sorrow, all of our fear.

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As I just said, today we're talking about healing...and I've already mentioned how much I love words. So I want to be upfront about how crucially important our words are when it comes to the idea of *healing*.

A lot of spiritual damage gets done over the idea of faith and healing: what it means...how it happens...why it does *not* happen sometimes...why it *does* happen other times.

People are known to say things like, “If you just have enough faith, God will heal you” or “When you pray hard enough and in the right spirit, God will answer your prayer” or “You know God won't give you any more than you can handle...”

Unfortunately, lots of people with lots of faith do not receive the kind of healing they hope for. Lots of people who pray hard – and in just the right spirit – find that God did not, in fact, answer their prayer in the way they wanted God to answer it. And we know too well there are plenty of folks out there who end up dealing with far more than they can “handle.”

Well, the other day, I realized / said something in my sermon last week I wish I hadn't said. (Not a fun realization for your word-obsessive pastor!)

In last week's message I said, “If we fail to bring our ugliness and our mess to [Jesus], he can't do anything to redeem it.” I wrote that...and I said it...but I actually don't believe it to be true. I think I included it in last week's sermon because it *sounds* good and powerful...but it just isn't correct.

Jesus is fully divine, so he has the power to redeem our ugliness and our mess whether we bring them to him or not. But there is power – for *us* – in the bringing. That's what I should have said last week. That's what I meant to say. And it makes sense for me to say it today.

Jesus has the power to redeem our ugliness and our mess whether we bring them to him or not. But there is power – for *us* – in the bringing. And, considering today's story from Mark chapter two, it's important for us to remember that bringing our ugliness, our mess...our brokenness...bringing them to Jesus is, in some ways, half the battle.

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Today's story from Mark chapter two is a great story. Jesus was home in Capernaum – possibly at Simon Peter's house – and the crowds sort of descended upon him: the house was so full there wasn't even standing room in the doorway.

As Jesus was teaching, four able-bodied people came to the house with a friend who was, as the reading says, “crippled.”

(Other translations of the Bible say the man was paralyzed.) We don't know specifics about this man...we just know he couldn't walk. We don't even know his name...so we can't refer to him in any way other than “the crippled man.”

Anyway, the crippled man's four friends tried to carry him to Jesus, but the crowd was so big they couldn't get through. (I think it would be fair to say the crowd was so big that Jesus didn't even notice them *trying* to get through.) So, the group of five decided to get to Jesus another way: they climbed up on the roof, dug through the thatching, and lowered their friend down into the crowd.

As the story goes, Jesus told the man his sins were forgiven. Some religious leaders in the crowd then grumbled inwardly that Jesus didn't have the authority to forgive sins – that such authority belonged to God alone – so Jesus took it all a step further.

He said, “Why are you thinking such things? Is it easier for me to tell this crippled man that his sins are forgiven or to tell him to get up and pick up his mat and go on home? I will show you that the Son of Man has the right to forgive sins here on earth.”

Jesus then looked at the man on the mat and said, “Get up! Pick up your mat and go on home.” The man did...and everyone in the crowd was amazed at what they'd witnessed. //

It is, indeed, a great story, right? My favorite part about it, of course, is that the man *is* healed by Jesus.

I love that this once-crippled man can now live a life that is full in a way it couldn't have been before. He could now walk and run and dance – he was no longer restricted to life on a mat, likely forced to beg for money as his means of supporting himself...and always relying on the assistance of friends for transportation. I love that, in this story, Jesus fully heals the man. That is my favorite part.

But, in some ways, my *other* favorite part about this story is that the man had friends he could rely on. Not only did the man *get* to Jesus, and not only did Jesus offer the man exactly the kind of healing he was looking for, but he also had a community of support – “cheerleaders” who were willing to pull him up onto a roof, to dig through the thatching, and to lower him down into the house in *order* to get him *to* Jesus.

We all need a community of people like that. We need them in times of joy and health...and we especially need them in times of sickness and struggle.

This story is not just about Jesus healing the once-crippled man. It's also about the community of people who helped make that healing possible.

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The good news of today's story from Mark chapter two is that, through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, God does, in fact, bring healing. At times, however, healing is a frustrating mystery: why it happens, why it doesn't happen.

But, perhaps most importantly, when it comes to healing, we need to remember that God brings it in many and varied ways – often through the people in our lives:

people who pray for us...people with medical training and expertise... people who bring us meals after surgery...people who drive us to and from appointments...people who sit with us in waiting rooms or in chemotherapy rooms...people who offer us their shoulder when we need to cry over a diagnosis...people whose presence calms us...people who bring laughter and joy in the midst of our pain and fear.

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Healing is not just about miracles – it's not just about Jesus fixing us in an instant. Healing is also about the people God blesses us with – the communities that surround us with help and support in our times of need.

So, may we be ever thankful for those God works through to bring us healing...and may we ever be inspired to be vessels of God's healing for others.