

United Lutheran Church
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Service of Healing and Holy Communion

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The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke the 13th chapter.

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.' But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?' When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Dear friends in Christ, Grace to you and peace from almighty God and the Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen

Jesus' ministry consisted mainly of two things - teaching about the coming reign of God and performing miracles - including many acts of healing - he healed the blind Bartimaeus, the woman with the flow of blood, the ten lepers, the bent-over woman in today's reading, always healing. Jesus' miracles of healing were expressions of his compassion and love, but also a sign of the coming kingdom of God - where there is perfect wholeness, balance and harmony, where all God's creatures, indeed the entire earth are well, whole and holy. There is no decay, no disease or death, but rather new creation.

Healing - in all its forms - is a sure sign of God at work in the world. It is not surprising that there are so many in our congregation who are involved in this ministry. Everyone from nurses to aides, physicians to parish nurses, technicians to therapists, pastors, Stephen ministers, senior leaders to volunteers. Others are involved in healing work in many other professions and vocations - from teaching to parenting, community organizing to farming.

Healing is what I do as a chaplain, too. I help hurting people tap into their own unique spiritual and religious resources to guide and support them in their healing journey. As you can hear as I am speaking – I am a wounded healer, but I have found in my work in a medical center that it is usually more important to be a good listener than a good talker!

Here are a few other things I've learned so far about healing:

--- 1) for Jesus, healing and salvation are closely linked, "Your faith has made you well, go in peace," Jesus says. In few other places in life do we experience God's mercy so richly as in the experience of healing. Who knows, maybe there is illness and pain in the world so that we can draw closer to God and to each other, in right relationship. There are few things in life that remind us how utterly dependent we are on the grace and mercy of a loving God.

--- 2) It is common for people to wonder, "Why me? What did I do to deserve this?" when we are facing severe illness or injury. But the reality is: disease and decay are a part of our lives. Even if we live as healthfully as is humanly possible, that still doesn't make us immune to illness and disease. It is wrong to blame anyone for their illness, and it is wrong to think that God is punishing you through illness. It's not punishment, it's real life. In retrospect some come to see their illness as a blessing in disguise because of the spiritual growth and deep healing that resulted, but that is for them to discover, not for us to prescribe.

--- 3) There are many pathways to healing, because healing involves the whole person – body, mind, spirit – and all our relationships. There are many healing modalities along with medical knowledge, skill, and technology that can help us to stand upright, whole and healed. Many of us are finding that it takes multiple pathways to find healing and wholeness in our lives – including nutrition, exercise, yoga, forgiveness work, massage, among many others.

--- 4) Your healing is unique to you. You are your own best primary caregiver – figuring out what is broken and bent in your life, listening to what your body is telling you, discerning what cripples you and weighs you down. It may be a physical ailment, it may be a broken relationship, an addiction, a heaviness of spirit, a grief that blinds you to the goodness of life. What is your greatest need? What is your path to healing? What is your prayer as you seek healing in your life?

--- Finally, Healing is not the same as curing. We all hope and pray for brokenness to be mended and disease to be cured, and we rejoice when this happens. But it is not always possible. We may pray for a miracle – but we do not put our faith in miracles, rather we put our faith in God, for healing in God's own way and God's own time.

Much of what I know about healing I learned from Gramma Mary Hanson, matriarch of the family farm in southeast Wisconsin where I grew up. The rheumatoid arthritis she had progressed very rapidly when I was

a young girl. She tried many different medical treatments and lots of alternative medicine over the years, she prayed constantly for healing, but nothing stopped the terrible advance of this disease. Soon she had to give up her role as the center and driving force of our farm life and my mother took on that mantle. My dad would go over to my grandparents' house located on the farm several times a day and lift and carry my crippled Gramma from bed to bath to living room as needed.

In time, her grief and bitterness mellowed as she prayed for a deeper healing – a healing of her spirit and a renewed sense of purpose in her life. With time and love – she experienced that healing. She became a gracious and grateful recipient of the care of others, a wonderful storyteller, and an avid student of Scripture. With her gnarled hands, she crocheted gifts for all her children, grandchildren, and many friends. She became a teacher to the pastors from Norway Church who came to visit. She had a spiritual depth and wisdom that, to a man, each pastor over the years felt they gained more than they gave when they encountered Gramma Hanson. She was hunched and bent-over, but she was not bowed. She found peace and purpose within her reality of coping with a terrible disease. She was upright in spirit and able to praise God in her way, just like the woman in our reading from Luke.

But this scripture is more than just a symbol, a metaphor of healing. There are real people involved here and it is a moment in Jesus' ministry filled with drama. What is the story of this woman, bent-over, unable to stand upright, unable to look her loved ones in the eye, whose view consists of looking sideways at the world for 18 long years? Suddenly, she appears at the synagogue where Jesus is standing, teaching. Had she heard about Jesus' miracles and persuaded some friends or family members to help her get to the synagogue, showing up late, right in the middle of his sermon? She doesn't know what will happen and her heart is beating wildly – but she has done what she could do and come to Jesus, put herself in his path, hoping and praying.

Notice what Jesus does – first of all, he sees her! He holds her in his gaze, and full of compassion he calls her to him, and the tension builds as she slowly, painfully makes her way forward. Jesus says, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." Then he lays hands on her and immediately she rises up and begins praising God, aglow with the healing energy, the light of Christ pulsing through her being – head thrown back with joy, arms raised in grateful praise.

Today – you have come here on this Sabbath to this house of God, placing yourself in Jesus' path, hoping and praying for healing. Today, Jesus SEES you, and gazes on you with mercy and compassion. Whatever healing is needed in your life – Jesus calls you – daughter of Abraham, son of Abraham – and sets you free from whatever ails you. Jesus heals and restores, forgives and renews, unbinds and releases, so that we might rise up, awash in the glow of God's glory, arms raised in thankful praise. Healed and restored, may we then extend that gift to other people, other creatures, and our beloved planet, as we pray and work to heal our broken world.

May the healing we experience today be a foretaste of the reign of God that is coming, and now is, in and through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Amen