

Preached 2/24/2013 at FPCAllegan

Isaiah 53:1-5

Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

<sup>2</sup> He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. <sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

<sup>4</sup> Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Mark 5:25-34

And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. <sup>26</sup> She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. <sup>27</sup> When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, <sup>28</sup> because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." <sup>29</sup> Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

<sup>30</sup> At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"

<sup>31</sup> "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'"

<sup>32</sup> But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. <sup>33</sup> Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. <sup>34</sup> He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

During Lent this year we are looking at a host of spiritual disciplines and practices from the book by Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*. Last week we were introduced to Contemplation and Discernment, and this week we move on to Healing and Shalom. After our introduction to this subject in worship today, you are all invited to practice healing prayer on Wednesday night at 6:30 pm in the sanctuary.

Not everyone is comfortable with the idea of asking God for healing. For many people, when you talk about healing in the context of religion, they become skeptical and they envision and talk about one character in particular, Benny Hinn.

Beginning in 1983, Benny Hinn began having his "Miracle Crusades" in which he focused on "Word of faith healing". Multiple investigations, from the La Times, NBC's *Dateline*, HBO and 60 Minutes did their investigative journalism with hidden cameras and left as complete skeptics and were widely critical of Benny Hinn's claims. When the CBC did their 2004 investigation for the television program, *The Fifth Estate*, they were especially critical of the way that audience members were chosen to come on stage with Benny Hinn. The most desperate miracle seekers, those in wheelchairs, people with a visibly obvious condition such as brain damage

or cerebral palsy are never allowed on stage at a Hinn Crusade. At one Canadian *Miracle Crusade* service, the CBC hidden cameras showed a mother who was carrying her daughter with Muscular Dystrophy trying to get into line for blessing from Benny Hinn. When the line screening staff found out that her daughter had not been healed, the mother and her child were asked to get out of line. They were reluctant to do so. The daughter, whose name was Grace asked her mother to support her as she attempted to walk in order to show the line attendants "Her faith in action". After Grace fell down several times, the mother and daughter left the auditorium in tears, without their blessing and without healing.

These investigations into Benny Hinn have greatly hurt the reputation of healing prayer, and have caused many mainline churches to drop any reference to Gods power to heal. However, Hinn's reputation should be contrasted with other accounts of the power of healing prayer that have been well documented.

Aimee Semple McPherson began preaching in 1913 as a tent evangelist after growing up as a girl in the Salvation Army. Along with her mother, she would eventually drive her 1912 Packard Touring Car plastered with religious slogans all over the United States. Upon reaching a

town, she would preach at first through a megaphone from the backseat of the convertible until she built up enough interest to hold a local revival meeting. Upon reaching Los Angeles, McPherson decided to stay in one place. And as her following grew, she started the *Foursquare Gospel Church* in California and built the Angelus Temple in Echo Park. From the 1920's - until she died in 1944, people reported being healed during her revival meetings. Over the course of her ministry, many people investigated and documented the healings that occurred through Aimee Semple MacPherson. For example, in 1921, the *American Medical Association of San Francisco* secretly entered and investigated several of her revival meetings. Their subsequent AMA report concluded that the healings were, "Genuine, beneficial and wonderful."

There are several big differences between the *Healing Crusades* of Benny Hinn and MacPherson's Revival meetings. The first is that the only people that Hinn ever allows on stage were people without visual ailments who also have a healing story to share. The healings become the focus and the purpose of the service. However, when asked about the healings occurring at her services, McPherson would downplay them and focus instead on her goal of leading people to Jesus. McPherson would also allow the visibly infirm to come on to stage for prayer, and while there is

famous photo documentation of a woman being healed and walking away from her wheelchair, not every person who presented themselves for prayer by Aimee McPherson was healed. In fact, a survey done in 1921 by Pastor William Keeney Towner from San Jose CA after a McPherson rally up in his area found that only 6% of the respondents indicated that they were immediately and completely healed at a McPherson revival service, while 85% indicated that they were partially healed and have continued to see improvement. However, 99.5 % felt spiritually uplifted and felt that their life and their faith was strengthened by the process of participating in the healing prayer.

In addition to the documentation of the healing done by McPherson, people who work in hospitals have their own stories to tell about patients who were inexplicably healed without medical intervention. These medical professionals are the first to encourage healing prayers by and for their patients.

When we look through the New Testament, we see Jesus healing people in many times and places. Here in Mark chapter 5 we find a woman who had been ritually unclean with menstrual bleeding for 12 years.

When we hear the word "healing" today in the 21st century, we tend to think only about healing in our physical bodies. Today, we have a huge

medical establishment that has a massive professional business of healing. With the world headquarters of Perrigo Corporation right here in Allegan county, we think of physical healing and the pharmaceutical industry. But healing is not simply limited to our physical ailments. Frequently along with our physical problems, people have psychological troubles and spiritual crisis of faith as well. Trauma from our past and our sense of our purpose and place in life effect us as much as something that may be wrong with our physical body. We are holistic people, made up of Body, Mind and Spirit. While today we tend to treat these areas things separately; going to the doctor for our physical problems, our therapist for our psychological issues and head over to the church for spiritual support, many times those three areas are closely related.

In the First Century, the body/ spirit connection was considered as intertwined as we consider it as being separate today. In many instances when Jesus healed someone, Jesus also cast out a demon or forgave the person their sins. In the case of our passage in Mark 5 today, a woman with this type of menstruation issue this woman would have been in a state of ritual uncleanness for 12 years. This means that not only that she would have been viewed as unclean, but anything she sat on would be

considered unclean and anyone that she touched would be unclean. For 12 years, this woman not only suffered from her bleeding disorder, but she suffered psychologically from being outcast from others and normal interactions with people during that time. She would have also have suffered spiritually, because a woman who was menstruating was not allowed to worship in the temple. Yet in the midst of her physical, mental and spiritual pain she reaches out for help, and in doing so she breaks through all of the religious laws that forbid her to touch anyone else, and especially to touch a rabbi such as Jesus. Spiritually she frees herself from the box that she had been living in. By listening to Jesus preach, this woman had also changed her thinking about herself, and she grasped onto a new hope for the future. The story today in Mark 5 is not a simple faith healing of a woman from a physical condition. The story in Mark 5 is the story of a complete rebirth of a person. This woman is indeed "born again" into a new way of living and loving. Instead of being defined by her illness, she is given a new life that is built on wholeness and on complete harmony with yourself and others. This is a concept that the Bible refers to as "Shalom".

The word shalom is found in many places in the Bible, but you may not recognize it and have skipped over it in your reading. Shalom is usually

translated as, "Peace", which in English we think of a lack of fighting, a truce or a cease fire agreement. But Shalom is actually much bigger and much more all encompassing than the word "Peace." Shalom describes a state of completeness and wholeness. A state of being where everything in your life, your physical being, your emotional being and your spiritual well being are all in harmony with God, others and yourself. Shalom is the world in balance, a descriptor of where good has prevailed and everything is thriving and doing well. Shalom is a life thriving with prosperity for all people, it means that all is safe, well and happy and complete and whole. Shalom describes a life where amends have been made, promises have been kept, old grudges forgiven, all things restored. Shalom is not simply a personal characteristic, shalom is a community, a nation and a world at its best, whole and in harmony.

Since the times of the ancient near east as documented in the Old Testament, and continuing on until today, the word Shalom has been used as both a greeting and as a farewell in the Middle East. While idiomatically, we would translated "Shalom" or "Salam" as "hello" or "goodbye", Shalom is actually a blessing and a hope that for you and between you two that all things would be whole and in harmony with the world.

So when we as a church pray for healing, we are not simply asking God for a miracle to heal a simply physical condition. --Our prayers to God to give us back the body that we had when we were 20 years old is not the right understanding of what healing and what shalom is. (There is a time and a season for everything, including a time for having a younger body!)

--But a prayer for shalom, inviting God to come in and to heal the spiritual hurts that still haunt us, the emotional trauma of things that have happened to us, and yes, even prayers for helping our bodies to heal themselves is all a part of a prayer for shalom for yourself, for others and for the world.

In conclusion, there is no reason for the church today to be afraid to pray for healing. In fact healing has been part of the Presbyterian understanding of faith for centuries. Many hospitals around the nation still have "Presbyterian" in their names because they were founded by people in our denomination who paired their healing work with their faith. Their continued ministry embodies the commitment that Christians have to their work to create Christ's shalom in the world.

This Wednesday evening, when we pray for healing, we will be praying for "shalom". Not only for ourselves, but shalom for our families,

shalom for our church, shalom for Allegan, for our country and the world.

Our understanding of God's desire for us to live in this state of harmony

with everything and everyone is key to understanding and embracing the

Biblical notion of healing and shalom. I pray you will join us. Amen.

Rev. Karen Fitz La Barge. Copyrighted Material. All Rights Reserved