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We are all wounded healers  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
February 4, 2024  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Corinthians 9:16-23 and Mark 1:29-39

Our worship theme today is about healing. I thought it was important to take time to reflect on healing before we get into Lent this year. So - why healing? Why now? Why not? We do all need healing after all. I make that bold statement based solely on the fact that every person here today is - a human being. And as far as I can tell, needing healing is just part of the human condition. Besides, since the lectionary is providing readings from Mark this year, it's pretty hard to avoid the subject. Read even just the first chapter of Mark and you'll know what I mean. In Mark 1, Jesus is baptized, goes into the wilderness on his vision quest, and then when he comes out of the wilderness and begins his public ministry. Step one is calling the disciples. And the next 5 stories in Mark - back to back - are about healing.

But for today, put away any images you might have of healing services where people are slayed in the spirit and cured of their diseases. You know what I mean. Services with lots of hype and a big name gospel preacher. A preacher who enlivens the crowd with preaching and then heals people as they line up and come onto the stage. A service where people literally throw their crutches away. I'm not hostile to those services, it's just not what I'm expecting today. Besides, those "healing" services should - in my mind - be called "cure" services, not "healing" services. Because during those service, the preacher - or the spirit if you prefer - cures people of specific, known diseases. That's cure. And to me, cure has almost nothing to do with healing.

What's the difference between healing and cure? I'm glad you asked. Feel free to disagree with my definitions, but here's how I look at it.

"Cure" is about getting rid of a diseases or some situation we don't like. If you break your arm, the cure is to put your arm in a cast and fix it. You want to take your broken arm and do something to it so that it becomes good as new again. In other words, cure is about wanting to move back in time. Cure is about going back to a known past (a

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time in our past before we had any illness). Whereas “Healing” is about learning to live and even thrive with an existing disease or situation. Healing is about moving forward in time into an unknown future. “Cure” says I want to live like I did yesterday. “Healing” says I want to truly live today - whatever that means and in spite of reality. Not living in denial, but living well given our reality.

Another difference between healing and cure. Cure usually take a certain amount of time, and then we say we are cured. Healing is a life-long, iterative process.

A great example of cure is when you break your arm. Great examples of healing include when a loved one dies, or when the kids leave home. In those cases we cannot go back to the past, so in order to live well today, we need healing.

Some of the stories of Jesus healing people really sound more like cure - like the passage we read from Mark this morning. Casting out demons sounds like cure. Sometimes cure can be just what we need - not healing. And of course, I would love to ask Jesus about whether or not Jesus cured Simon’s mother-in-law just so that she could get out of bed and make them lunch. But that’s another sermon.

Instead, I want to share another well known healing story from Mark 10. The story is sometimes called “Jesus and the rich young ruler”. One version goes like this. “As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before Jesus, and asked him, Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus said to him, Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not defraud. Honour your father and mother. The man said to Jesus, Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth. Jesus, looking at the man, loved him and said, You lack one thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. When the man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” (Mark 10:17-22 NRSV).

Wait a minute - was that the right story? That doesn’t sound like a healing story. Where is the healing in that story? I actually see lots of healing in this story. No cure. But lots of healing. And perhaps that’s the first surprising thing about healing stories. If we are not paying attention we might just miss that fact that there was any healing at all.

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Cure is usually easy to see. Healing often is not always obvious.

[discussion - where did you see healing in that story]

In the story, the rich man - we hope - finds healing from finally understanding that he is not perfect after all. The man finds healing when he - rich ruler that he is - figures out that he does not in fact have it all figured out. The man finds healing in realizing that he actually values the treasures of this world more than any hoped for treasures in the next. The man finds healing because he come to a better understanding of who he is. And, who he is not. The man comes to see that he lacks humility. That sounds like healing to me.

If we define healing that broadly, perhaps you have experienced healing like that yourself. Or perhaps you have a sense of where you yourself need healing. When I said that is part of the human condition to need healing, that's the type of healing I was talking about. Healing is optional - we can resist it. But when we embrace healing is simply becomes part of our ongoing journey of life.

There are lots of times we do not recognize healing in stories, or in our own lives. One reason is that we sometimes confuse a problem in our lives with a symptom of another problem. We sometimes spend all our efforts getting rid of symptoms. But they always return because we don't address the actual problem. Sometimes we don't know what the real problem is. Sometimes we do know what the problem is but simply do not want to deal with it. So instead we just focus on symptoms because that is often easier.

That is why I love the story of the rich young ruler. The man believes his problem is simply what he has to do to achieve salvation. But Jesus sees right through that. The man's wealth and his belief that he has never broken any laws is really just a symptom. A symptom of the man's real problem. Which is that the man has no real sense of self or any sense of humility. The man wanted to focus on the symptom, but Jesus took him straight to his own problem. And I love the drama in the story. The man calls Jesus "good" and Jesus responds that no-one is good - not even the rich man. That one line sets the stage for the rest of the story.

What do you think? Do you agree that there is deep healing in that story? Or have you decided that Rev. Paul just did not make enough time for sermon prep this week?

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Let me share another story with you. The story is about a subway musician. You know, those people who play live music in a subway station in the hope of earning a few coins. I myself remember many subway musicians - particularly at Finch subway station. The TTC makes them audition, you know, so they have to have to be pretty good. But of course it's a tough crowd to work. People are scrambling to get to work. People are already focused on the demands of the day ahead. And at Finch Subway, most people who are reaching into their pockets for coins are planning to stop at Tim Hortons, not give it to a musician.

Anyway, in this particular story, the Washington Post had planted a musician in a subway station just to watch what happened. They planted Joshua Bell, a world-famous musician. This is a musician who - the night before - packed and thrilled a theatre where the average ticket price was \$100. This is a musician who plays on a violin valued at over \$3.5 million. This is a musician who can charge \$1000/minute for playing - just slightly less than I make preaching. And Bell - in spite of being in a noisy commuting environment, chose to play very interesting and challenging musical selections. That was all part of the experiment.

The organizers expected that a crowd of 30-40 people would gather to hear - for free - one of the best violin musicians in the world. Genius is always recognized, right? And what do you think happened? Well, not much happened. Bell played for a full 45 minutes, and over 1,000 people passed by. But of those 1,000 people, only 2 people stayed to listen. One person recognized Bell by his face. The other person recognized the rare talent and stayed to soak it up for the 2 minutes that they had to spare on their way to the office.

The organizers of this experiment were surprised. The musician was surprised too. Partly because nobody stopped to listen. But Bell was particularly stunned by what happened when he stopped playing between songs. Because when he stopped playing, there was no response at all from anyone. That was a stunning experience for Joshua Bell. For decades he had enjoyed expressions of praise and acclamation when he let his bow come to a rest. In the subway, the only response when he stopped playing was that the music stopped. People who had not really noticed him playing did not notice when he

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stopped playing. Normal life just continued to go on as it always did. I hope that Bell found some healing in that moment.

Healing can be like that. We can be in the presence of everything we need to find our own healing, but be too busy or distracted to recognize reality in our own midst. Healing requires that we pay attention to life - the here and the now.

Healing also requires a type of strength that some people call “weakness”. Which is why St. Paul said, “to the weak, I became weak”. We cannot be fully engaged in life sitting on a high horse. We have to accept our own frailties. And one of the forms of “weakness” that each of us must accept is simply admitting that we ourselves do in fact need our own healing. We also need a certain amount of vulnerability to accept help from other people as we explore our own healing.

And this is where I get excited about healing in the church. Because those other people who might help you find your own healing might be other people present in this very sanctuary or online - even if they do look like unexpected travellers on our journey. The person you need to help you might be present in your midst right now. Right now, you might be ignoring them as you would ignore Joshua Bell if you were racing off to work, but they are right here. That is what real community is. That is what church is. A place where we come together to help each other find healing and hope.

Lent - which is almost here - is a journey of reflection, meditation, and healing. But nobody said we have to make that journey on our own. We have God. We have each other. We just need a willingness to be vulnerable and open. To each other, and to God.

And - of course - we need to be loving, particularly to the people who dare to risk being vulnerable. We need to be loving to whoever it is that God places in our path. My favourite line in the story of the rich young ruler is this, “Jesus, looking at the man, loved him and said, You lack one thing ...” It seems like an odd statement. Jesus could have asked the the rich man for money to support his ministry and the man would have walked away feeling good about himself. But Jesus chose love - tough love in this case - and instead chose to help the man find healing. And Mark points out that Jesus’s words came from a place of love. Jesus looked at the man, loved him, and then challenged him to grow up a bit and find some healing.

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It was love that compelled Jesus to help the man, rather than taking money from him - money Jesus might have actually needed. And so it is with us. When God puts someone in our path, we need to first love them and not see them as a means to our own ends.

We are all wounded in our own ways. And we are all capable of helping each other find healing. We are all - in fact - wounded healers. All of us. All of us. May God give us the insight and strength to live into that gift as we approach Lent.

*Amen.*