

“Jesus’ Mission of Healing”
Luke 4:31-44
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What is our mission in life? How do we know how we are to spend our gifts, our treasures, our time? Last week we suggested that we start to find our mission by identifying our gifts and abilities. Because we’re all wired differently, not everyone is an organizer; not everyone is a compassionate listener; not everyone is a leader ... though in this community we have a frighteningly high percentage of chiefs. As St. Paul reminds us, all gifts are useful; and he invites us to celebrate not only the gifts we have but also the ones we don’t have – the ones the person next to us possesses in spades. A key part of discovering our mission – which we do, by the way, not once, but at intermittent seasons in our life – a key part of discovering our mission is identifying our gifts.

But that’s only the first part of the process. It’s only when we take the next step and seek *God’s purposes, God’s agenda* that we really find our mission. And the way we discover God’s purposes begins here: by looking at Jesus’ own mission and following his example. *Imitatio Christi*, the ancients called it: the imitation of Christ. Last week we began with Jesus’ message of compassion, inclusion, and justice, a message that Jesus stuck to even when it wasn’t popular; even when it caused him rejection. This week we look at another aspect of Jesus’ mission: his extraordinary work of healing. I invite you to follow along with me in the Scripture today; please open your Bible to Luke 4:31-44; it is found on page ___ in the New Testament of your pew Bible. Plan to keep the Bible open, too – we’ll be covering particular verses in the sermon, and I’d like you to look at them as we go.

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Today I want to talk about healing. Not the physical mechanics of healing – I’ll leave that to our able nurses and doctors and researchers. Today I want to talk about the spiritual mechanics of healing – the healing Jesus did as a core of his

mission. This is the healing we're still invited to receive from Jesus' hand ... and it's also the healing we're invited to share as his disciples.

When I was reading this passage in our pastors' Bible study, three key messages hit me over the head.

First, *rebuke* is part of healing. We tend to think of rebuke only negatively, painfully, and so we protect ourselves and our loved ones from it. But over and over again, this passage reminds us that without rebuke, there is no healing. First, in verse 35, Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit that is in the man; then in verse 39 Jesus rebukes the fever infecting Simon's mother-in-law; and again in verse 41, Jesus rebukes numerous demons who confront him when he's healing the crowds, indicating this will be an ongoing and essential part of Jesus' mission.

Now, notice that Jesus does not rebuke the *people* – he rebukes the demons and illnesses that *possess* people. That's a crucial distinction, missed, I dare say, by some of our more fundamentalist brothers and sisters.

But it's also crucial for us to admit that there are things worth rebuking: Addictions and dependencies that overwhelm people's lives. Toxic habits, like disdain or meanness or adultery, toxic habits that destroy relationships. Winks and nods that condone corruption. Environmental degradation that threatens our children's future. Poverty that robs some children of their lives. These are things that are worth rebuking, along with other "demons" I'm sure you yourself have encountered. Jesus wasn't afraid to confront our demons, nor did he pretend they would simply disappear on their own. Instead, he spoke the truth with authority over the sick behaviors; and he spoke the truth with love for the person affected. As Christians, we engage in Jesus' mission of healing when we allow our harmful behaviors to be rebuked, and when we are courageous to rebuke destructive habits in our society and – tenderly, gently -- in those we love. This is the first point: rebuke is an *essential* part of healing.

Second, healing can hurt, but it doesn't cause us *harm*. This may seem like double-speak, but bear with me. Notice that when Jesus healed the man with a demon, the Scripture says "when the demon had thrown the man down, he came out of him without having done him any harm." I love the honesty of this: it doesn't say the man's healing was *painless* – the demon threw him to the ground – but it also says it didn't cause him *harm*. I wonder how often we've resisted real healing in our lives, simply because we're afraid of the pain we'll go through to get there. We cling to those things that are familiar to us like a worn-out security blanket, even when we know we do not need them ... *even* when we know they do us harm. It's most obvious in addictive illnesses: we know the alcohol or the shopping or the gaming or whatever drug of choice is self-destructive, but we're scared of facing life without it. But I've observed this clinging-to-the-harmful-but-familiar at work in many of us at some level. One man I know, a friend of our family – he has given me permission to share this – this man I know confesses to a deep-seated sense of inadequacy. Most of the time he's able to cover his fear of failure, or laugh it off; he even forgets it for seasons at a time. But whenever he's in a transition at work – especially when he's about to succeed – the demon rears its ugly head again to tell him that he's never going to be good enough. And he has believed that demon, and trusted that it's true, and he has clung to that demon for dear life *just because it's so familiar*.

Here's the truth: healing can hurt. But as my friend is discovering bit by bit, letting go of his demons is worth every flinch ... because, in Jesus' hands, any pain he's feeling is temporary pain; and any hurt he's going through is the kind of hurt that brings us wholeness. And it is so much less painful than the kind of hurt that has enslaved him.

My third and final "aha" from this passage is this: healing is more than simply relief, more than freedom *from* crippling behaviors. Healing frees us *for* other things: for service, for sharing, for life. Notice in verse 39 what happens to Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Jesus is in her home with Simon and the other disciples, and when they ask, he heals her of her fever. *Immediately* she gets up and begins to

serve them. I think of a teenager I know who went through brutal, though essential, surgeries. Brooke is her name; she'd had a childhood infection in her bone that stopped the growth plate, and had to endure endless rounds of operations on her leg. It's wonderful that the surgeries, and endless physical therapy, got her back on her feet again. In fact, between her earliest surgeries and her last rounds in high school, she pushed herself to earn a black belt in Tae Kwon Doe. But the truly spiritual mark of her healing is this: her extraordinary kindness, her innate sympathy for those who suffer, her capacity for compassion. Indeed, last I heard she's debating between being a special education teacher or physical therapist. She has been more than freed from her physical distress; she has been freed *for* her joyful mission in life. And it is beautiful.

It has dawned on me that these three truths about healing – that rebuke is an essential part; that healing can hurt temporarily but doesn't harm us; that healing is more than relief, it is freedom – it has dawned on me that this healing applies to us not just as individuals. It applies to us as a congregation too. This is what I've been thinking.

First, I can't be sure, because I wasn't here, but I sense that over the last five or ten years, our congregation has experienced what felt to some like a rebuke. From what I've heard, tempers were short, turf-wars were hot, and gracious forbearance was in short supply. Plenty of parishioners left, and more than a few staff members, and those who were left had to examine whether our well-burnished self-regard needed to be re-examined. Truth-telling is never easy, and hearing judgment is even less savory. But over the course of time, people had courage to speak the truth in love about our unloving habits and traits. That was the first step to our healing.

Second, I sense that the healing we went through was not without pain, but it certainly did us no harm in the long haul. The egos we tiptoed around were more resilient than we had feared; the habits of irritability and lashing out were more easily set aside than we had imagined; the core of our mission and worship was far

less eroded, far more enduring and secure than many had even dared hope. We were able to let go of our demons without lasting harm.

And now, I wonder whether we're at our third point in healing. I sense that in the last year there has been a great, collective sigh of relief: we are not in constant pain as a church anymore. It feels so good; so light; so freed from the oppression of bracing ourselves for the next battle. There's almost a sense of holding our breath, because we're not entirely sure that it's safe to come out yet. I just want you to know, as far as I can tell, this is really the real deal.

But ... but now we face the question, what are we freed and healed *for*? I ask this question not just in a theoretical way, but with a very practical problem in mind. This week, the Finance Committee presented the Moderators of Session Committees, Deacons, Chancel Guild and Presbyterian Women with some difficult news. Revenues fell short of the planned 2007 budget by \$175,000. This is not catastrophic, by any means. But it is not insignificant.

I'm not sure how to read this lackluster giving. But since that meeting I've been wondering -- I've been wondering whether we've made the connection between our *healing* and our *mission of serving*. The Lord has healed us; it is not our own doing. But now that we're healed, what are we healed *for*?

How we answer this question will reflect in the way we answer our shortfall. The obvious answer is to cut back on expenses, which your leaders immediately offered to do. A significant sign of the health of our church is that, instead of protecting their turf, *all* the moderators chipped in what they could. But after the first \$20,000 in appropriate belt-tightening, none of these cuts is easy. For example, if our mission giving through Deacons and the Session stayed flat from this year, we could trim \$80,000 from the deficit – but our percentage of mission giving in relation to the whole budget would have decreased. Or, if we postponed calling a pastor for mission to fill Gordon's position, we could trim \$27,500 for that quarter

of salary and benefits -- but we would delay crucial work that is so central to our identity.

We could also answer by asking a handful of our most generous donors to chip in more. After all, they underwrote the new landscaping, Narthex, and parking lot; surely they could pitch in extra dollars now. I confess that I was tempted to go this route; it is the easiest thing for a pastor to do, and I trust that these people would be generous indeed. But it wouldn't help to strengthen our church; for this church is *not* a church of "patrons" but of *disciples*. All of us – richer or poorer – are members of Christ's family, and all of us have been healed by his hand; all of us have been freed to carry out his mission of compassion.

So what shall we do? How shall we approach our shortfall? I may be deluded – I may be blind -- I may be in need of healing myself! – but I propose this. I propose that we respond to Christ's healing of our congregation by standing up and acting like healed people. I propose that we move beyond the sheer joy of relief – the worship wars and turf battles are close to done – we move beyond relief to the even greater joy of serving – first, by revisiting our pledges, and then, by hurling ourselves into God's purpose for the abundant non-tangible gifts of our members. I *love* the way the Deacons made it so easy for us to participate: the letter they sent out earlier this month included a list of dozens of ministries, small and large, for us to engage in.

One very wise woman, a member of our congregation, once said this about our lives as Christ's disciples: "Those who know they are saved can't help but share; those who know they are saved can't help but love." Love is, after all, what healing is for.

I have been speaking to you as people who *have been* healed, as sons and daughters of God who *have* felt the gracious presence of Christ's kindness in your lives. But now I must say also this. If you have not yet felt healing ... if you still long for a measure of God's grace ... if you are hungry for mercy, and longing to be

freed from an addiction or fear, from selfishness or meanness, from any dis-ease that has robbed you of your freedom: I want to speak to you now. The Lord has laid down his own life for you, so that you might really live. The Lord has more than abundant love for you, and compassion beyond measure. Whatever you've done, God has already forgiven. Whatever has bound you, God is able to loosen. And whatever you're here on earth to do, whatever your mission for whatever days you have left, God is ready to free you to live for. Let go of the crutch that you cling to. Let go, and rise up and walk. Let go, and rise up, and serve him.

Let us pray

O Lord, you know us through and through. You know the illnesses we pretend do not overtake us; you know the demons that steal our wills and break our loved ones' hearts. Rebuke these captors, now, dear Lord, and release us from our tormentors. Help us to endure whatever small pain of our letting go, that we might grasp the great joy you would give to us. Free us, Lord, and those we love ... that we may go our way rejoicing ... that we may live to share the healing we have known. Amen.