**A Spirit of True Healing**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

On the 15th Sunday after Pentecost

And the Baptism of Katherine Rose Shank

At St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford, MA

When you read the gospels, it’s clear that there are many reasons why people in the first century were curious about Jesus. Some of them were interested in the intelligent wisdom of an itinerant rabbi. Others were attracted to a man who was willing to stand up to both religious and political authority. But throughout the gospels, again and again it is Jesus’ identity as a healer that seems to be most attractive to the crowds and onlookers. Healing stories appear repeatedly in the Gospels, and it’s clear that Jesus’ reputation as one who could bring about healing preceded him wherever he went. It would be hard to argue that healing wasn’t at the heart of Jesus’ earthly ministry.

But I think sometimes we (and many who have come before us) misunderstand what is at the heart of Jesus’ ministry of healing. For Jesus, healing was never just about curing disease. He does that, and fairly often. And it made him popular in his time. But Jesus’ ministry of healing was really about something else. It was really about creating wholeness where there was brokenness and estrangement. Wholeness for individuals, wholeness for communities, and ultimately, wholeness for the entire human family. This is the underlying theme of nearly all the healing stories in the Gospels – though it is really only in John’s Gospel that those themes are explicitly revealed.

Today, in Mark’s Gospel, we get two short healing stories. It’s hard, at first, to see beyond just the physical transformation of a person’s body being healed. But when we dig a little deeper, we can see that both healing stories today are not just about curing someone of an illness, but rather are about restoring a relationship where there had been estrangement, and bringing greater wholeness and reconciliation into the world.

In the first story, a Gentile woman seeks out Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, and begs for healing for her child. Jesus’ initial response is, frankly, rude. It highlights the distance between Jews and non-Jews in the first century, suggesting that Jesus’ ministry is restricted in some way to only Jews. Calling her a dog is not in any way meant to be endearing. First century dogs were dirty, wild, and, especially in a group, often savagely violent. It could hardly be anything but an insult, highlighting the divisions between the woman and Jesus. In fact, scholars believe that in addition to differences in religion, the slur also has economic class dimensions to it. In the coastal region of Tyre, Jews in the countryside produced much of the food that sustained the Gentiles who lived mostly in the city itself and who operated the trading port. In times of famine, when there wasn’t enough food to go around, Jews often found themselves and their families starving while the Gentiles survived on the food the Jews had produced. Jesus’ choice to use a food metaphor refers to the way that the distribution of food resources in this first century community served to create disharmony, resentment, and suffering.

It is this woman’s persistence – her desire to have a relationship with Jesus, even across all the differences that divide them – that leads to the healing miracle. When he announces the healing, Jesus even says that the child is made well because of what she has said. Because of her persistence in seeking relationship across all kinds of inequalities and social differences – healing is available to her. Yes, he cures a child in a miraculous way – but that cure is actually the byproduct of a more important kind of healing between this gentile woman and the Jewish rabbi that has to occur first.

In the second story, Jesus heals a man who cannot hear and who speaks with an impediment. Though it’s not true today, in the first century, the inability to hear and to speak clearly were nearly insurmountable obstacles to being part of community life. The inclusion of this healing story in Marks’ Gospel is meant to highlight again that restoring right relationship is at the heart of Jesus’ healing ministry. The healing performed isn’t simply the curing of a cough or the repair of a broken bone. Rather it is the ability to speak and hear, to converse, to communicate, to be in relationship with the rest of the community. God always desires to bring us more and more into community with each other – even when that seems impossible. If this particular story were written today, perhaps Jesus’ miracle would have been that suddenly everyone could use sign language, rather than give hearing to the man. Either way, the restorative effect would have been the same.

I wonder what kind of healing you are in need of today? What brokenness has infected your ability to be in right relationship with those around you? I’m sure each one of us comes here to church today with our own unique yearnings for greater wholeness in our lives and in the life of the world. Like the deaf man or the pleading woman, your struggle matters deeply to God.

Perhaps, this week, like me, some of you are struggling especially with the brokenness of the world – particularly that being revealed by the refuge crisis in Syria and eastern Europe – now crystalized in that terrible picture of the single deceased child washed up on a beach. This image has been circulating in the media over the past week and it is heartbreaking. Pictures like that reveal the brokenness in our human family. They challenge our prevailing wisdom. They release our tears. And hopefully, they help us to, as Jesus said to the deaf man, “be opened.” To be open to a transformed reality in which bodies do not wash up ashore. To be opened to hope that those still migrating will find sanctuary. To be opened to the possibility that we can make those realities come to pass. And to be opened to the harsh truth that, in fact, it is only we, acting together, who can.

Jesus never kept the ministry of healing to himself. Two chapters earlier in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus commissions his twelve disciples, his closest followers, to be agents of healing themselves. He gives them this authority and then sends them away in pairs to perform this ministry of creating wholeness wherever their journeys lead them. Jesus knows that the pathway for true healing in the world is not to create a cult following around himself, but rather for Jesus to create a whole community of healers at work in the world.

There’s a name for this community of healers. It’s called the church. Every week we come to this altar to share in heavenly meal: the bread and wine. And then we are sent forth back into the world, to be bearers of Christ’s love and agents of divine healing in a world that so badly needs it. Listen to the words of the post-communion prayer today. This is what we pray for: to come to the altar and be healed, and then return to the world and offer our lives as instruments of peaceful and transformative change. Week in and week out, we sustain each other in this desire.

And today, we are delighted to welcome the newest person into that community, Katherine Rose, whom we are about to baptize. For centuries, Baptism was thought of as the ritual that healed us – that took away some kind of original sin or stain that somehow infected the soul of every living person. But we no longer believe that to be true. Baptism isn’t a ritual that heals us, rather it is the ritual whereby we become agents of God’s healing for others. Of course, by becoming an agent to build up the healing of our world, we are also, in some way, soothing the wounds that the broken world inflicts on each of us from time to time – responding to our own pain by inflicting on others not pain, but the same love and dignity that we believe God has for all people. As we gather at the font in a moment, I hope we will offer a prayer for Katherine and the ministry of healing that will now belongs to her, And I pray that we too will be reminded of our call not just to be healed, but to be agents of God’s healing in our families, our community, and throughout the world. Amen.