

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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HEALING PLACES

19th Apr 2015

Acts 3:12-19

1 John 3:1-7

One of the things that marked out Jesus' ministry as he went through Palestine was that he healed. He did lots of healings, of all kinds of conditions, and that was one of the main reasons why people initially sought him out. They wanted to be healed by him, or they wanted to bring him friends or relations who needed healing. Healing was a part and parcel of Jesus' message and ministry, it was one of the ways in which people could see that the Kingdom of God was breaking in on the world.

Last week as we read some of the stories of what happened after the resurrection, we saw Jesus giving the disciples the Holy Spirit. The gift of his resurrection was to give God to his followers, to bring them into fellowship with God, to bring God to them, to make them what Jesus himself was and is. Jesus, remember, received the Spirit at his baptism, when the voice of God named him his beloved Son. After the resurrection Jesus gives that same Spirit to his followers and he tells them to forgive, which is God's work. This week we see those disciples beginning to work out what else is God's work which they should be doing. One of the examples of God's work which they had from Jesus was that Jesus healed as an integral part of his ministry.

When we think of healing, we tend to think of the disease or the symptoms which need to be cleared up and go away. When you have a bad cold you want something to stop your head aching, your nose running, your throat from hurting and so on. When you are told that you have a weak heart, you want someone to give you something or do something to make your heart muscles stronger and more able to do the pumping job they were meant to. We think in terms of the medical side of healing. But in Jesus' day healing very often meant healing more than a body. Lepers, for instance, were put out of the community while they showed signs of the disease. The woman with internal bleeding whom Jesus healed was in a constant state of ritual impurity, and had to be shunned. The blind and deaf and lame were cut off from full and useful lives. When Jesus healed, it meant healing not only of symptoms, but of lives, a restoration to a full and valued place within society. Healing meant finding a belonging place again.

Peter and John healed a crippled man who sat at the beautiful gate of the temple. That is what happened just before the little sermon of Peter's which we read. They were coming to pray and they saw the man being left in his usual place at his usual time ready to beg from those going into the temple at the hour of prayer. That was this man's life. He was dependant on his friends to take him to the best place to beg, and he tried to make use of the worship of others to gain what he needed to survive. He was never able to go into the temple himself to worship, but his place was outside.

I wonder how much courage it took on Peter's part to do what he and John did? They stopped and gave the man their attention, which was not what he was expecting. Peter has to tell him to look at them, because he would be sitting in the attitude of the beggar, hand out and eyes averted. And then Peter takes a deep breath and says "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!" And he helps him to his feet.

And now what a change there is for the man. Not only can he walk – and indeed run and leap – but he can enter the temple and be a part of the worshipping community. He can take up his full part in society again. He is healed, not only his crippled legs are healed, but his life is healed as well. Healing is a whole person thing.

And Peter takes the opportunity to make sure that people know that this act of healing and restoration was not done through any power that he and John had of themselves. He makes sure that people know that it is because Jesus was raised from death that this power to heal has been set loose in the world. Peter tells them that the faith that is through Jesus has given the man perfect health, and of course the faith was not found in the man who was healed, this was not a case of someone being told that if they believe enough they will be healed – that is always a very dangerous and potentially damaging thing to say – it was a case of Peter and John having the faith that Jesus really had given them the same Spirit that was given to him to carry on the same work, which included the healing and restoration of lives.

Jesus was a healer and healing was known in the early church as well, healing of symptoms and healing of people, which is a far greater thing. It is still part of what the church is for today. We are to forgive, as we saw last week, and we are to heal. The two are very often very closely linked. So how does the church exercise its ministry of healing?

Some churches have a healing ministry for physical healing, with services where people can ask for prayer and where cures are given. Perhaps it is no coincidence that many of the churches which do this tend to be in places where health care is patchy or prohibitive. But you can find such churches everywhere, even in Scotland, and I am not the only person here today who has seen people made physically well through the power of prayer. So that is one way of doing things. But it is not the only way in which churches offer healing, indeed in our complicated society it is not always good to focus simply on physical healing, because that underlines the compartmentalised way we tend, most unhelpfully, to look at life. Our bodies are not all that we are and our bodies are not the only things in life which can need healing. And so it is important that churches first of all operate as healing communities, giving worth to those who feel worthless, and a place of belonging to those who do not fit in or belong.

As we have seen, when Peter and John did their first healing it changed things for the man, not only in his body but in his life in the community. He was no longer a receiver but became a contributor. He was given a sense of place and belonging and importance that that is crucial.

About sixteen years ago when I was training for the ministry, I undertook a placement at Richmond Craigmillar church in Edinburgh. If you know Edinburgh you will know that Craigmillar is not one of the more des res areas! It has in fact been cleaned up and given a make-over since I was there, so that at least the housing is a bit more fit for

purpose than it used to be, but still it is what it was then, a place of poverty, where many were put to live because they did not belong anywhere else, anywhere better.

While I was there, the church, which had a tiny congregation, was given a grant from the central church funds to employ someone part time to help them to develop a community café in their halls. A kitchen was installed, a local person, a church member, was employed and the café opened its doors. Cheap healthy food was offered, fruit and vegetables were served. The minister made herself available in the church building when the café was open so that people could stop by and talk to her. And the numbers coming grew and grew. Here was a place which people felt that they could belong, a group of people who knew their problems, because they had many of the same problems themselves, who listened, and who tried to give an answer. The presence of that church became a healing thing within the community.

A Credit Union was given a place within the church to run its business, and there was a furniture and clothing exchange. It all helped. As one thing led to another, a group for children who had known grief and bereavement was established and now does very creative work. There are no services for healing in Richmond Craigmillar but it is a real healing presence within its situation. As people are drawn to the church, they discover that what is offered is not just help for one aspect of life – whether it is thinking about how to feed the family or how to cope with sad times, but that the whole of life is healed and made better and they are given a place to belong.

A place to belong is a very important thing for us humans. In his epistle which we read part of today John is writing to Christians who do not feel that they fit in the world. To be a Christian, such a new and misunderstood thing to be, in the pagan world must have had people really wondering where they belonged. The Christian way of understanding the world, seeing it as God's creation, the focus of God's love, as the place where the new creation begun in the resurrection was taking hold was so totally different from the pagan way of looking at the world. Christians were taught to see each person as holy, as made in God's image, but the pagan world literally made their gods in the image of people, and valued people only as they were of use. How could a Christian be at home in that world? It was and it still is a dislocating thing to live as Christians in the world. But John reminds his readers, which includes us that the ultimate belonging we have is that we are children of God. Having a place of belonging is a healing thing. Spiritual homelessness is as difficult a condition to cope with as physical homelessness. We have a belonging place and it is as God's children. And this is why we can be those who reach out with healing and faith to all the sick and broken people among whom we live.

Healing does not just mean mending the broken leg or the torn muscles or getting rid of the cancerous growth. Healing means giving people wholeness, whole lives, whole understandings of who they are and why they matter. It is what God has given to us when he sent us Jesus. John told it perfectly when he said “See how much the Father has loved us, his love is so great, that we're called God's children.” All of us are broken in various ways, and feel less than whole and perfect, less than healed. But as we allow that great truth to fill us and feed us and shape our understanding of ourselves, then our lives and our selves will be healed, we will know where we belong and why we matter, and we will be able to offer the same healing love to others. Amen.