

1 Sermon, October 31, 2010

Texts: Isaiah 53:1-12, Luke 17:11-19

Title: "Wholeness"

You may have noticed that there are four months of the year that there are five Sundays in a month. On those fifth Sundays, we have a worship service that includes prayers for healing.

We do this because healing is a part of our Christian faith. It was central to the ministry of Jesus; it is still central to Christ's ministry today.

Think about it. God created you; your whole being. So God is not just concerned that you believe the right thing. God is not just concerned that you do the right thing. God is concerned about all of you; your spirit, your body, your mind, your relationships.

God deeply desires wholeness for you.

Two scripture passages illustrate this very well. First, from Isaiah we read this morning the Song of the Suffering Servant.

This passage tells us about the suffering of God's servant, and that it is by the servant's suffering that we are made whole.

3He was hated and rejected; his life was filled with sorrow and terrible suffering.

No one wanted to look at him.

We despised him and said, "He is a nobody!"

4He suffered and endured great pain for us,
but we thought his suffering was punishment from God.

5He was wounded and crushed because of our sins;
by taking our punishment, he made us completely well. . . .

10The LORD decided his servant would suffer as a sacrifice to take away the sin and guilt of others.

Now the servant will live to see his own descendants.
He did everything the LORD had planned.

11By suffering, the servant will learn the true meaning of obeying the LORD.

Although he is innocent, he will take the punishment for the sins of others, so that many of them will no longer be guilty.

12The LORD will reward him with honor and power for sacrificing his life. Others thought he was a sinner, but he suffered for our sins and asked God to forgive us.

God deeply desires wholeness for you. So much so that God sent Jesus to bring us forgiveness, freedom and healing.

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It's a paradox how God can use a wounded person to bring healing; but that's the way our God works.

In the ancient world there were many competing religions, and in some religions, the gods had human children, but they acted like spoiled brats.

Christianity was unusual in that Jesus was born in poverty to an average woman. Jesus suffered, wept, and cared.

It's hard for us to understand what a radical concept that was to the ancient world – that God would choose suffering. Even in the Judean faith that Jesus was a part of, God was seldom associated with suffering. Much more commonly, God was seen as commanding, revealing, miraculously rescuing, or smiting. These are big actions of a big God.

But Jesus, with his listening, teaching, healing and suffering brings it all to a very human scale.

Jesus' suffering was for our wholeness. Wholeness is maybe best described by the Hebrew word Shalom. Shalom is usually thought to mean peace, but it also means to be safe or complete or happy. Shalom describes the actions that lead to a state of soundness, or better yet wholeness. Shalom describes a reality and hope of wholeness for the individual, within societal relations, and for the whole world.

Just to name a few examples:

Shalom is an adopted child growing up to accept herself, despite not knowing who her birth parents were.

Shalom is a complete remission from a challenging disease.

Shalom is a man who went through a divorce that was not his choice, and coming to terms with it in his heart.

Shalom is holding the hand of someone who is dying and being with them as they peacefully slip away.

Shalom is realizing I can't change the world in the way I want it to be, but I can work on my own attitudes, and I will trust in God for the rest.

Shalom is a man who has a leg amputated firmly claiming that this does not make him any less of a person.

Shalom is a woman who with aging has lost some of her youthful beauty looking in the mirror and being satisfied with what she sees.

Shalom is finding reasons to laugh at misfortune instead of being burdened by it.

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Shalom is find someone who will really listen to you, and help you to speak the words you have wanted to say.

Shalom is one more day of sobriety for an alcoholic.

Shalom is when a woman who is depressed finds the fog lifting, and experiences again the ability to laugh and love.

I have seen these examples of shalom. You have seen many of these, too. Jesus came so that we might have that kind of shalom, and have it abundantly.

The Gospel reading gives us an opportunity to think even more about shalom, or wholeness. Let me read it again:

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus went along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men with leprosy came toward him. They stood at a distance and shouted, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" Jesus looked at them and said, "Go show yourselves to the priests." On their way they were healed. When one of them discovered that he was healed, he came back, shouting praises to God. He bowed down at the feet of Jesus and thanked him. The man was from the country of Samaria.

Jesus asked, "Weren't ten men healed? Where are the other nine? Why was this foreigner the only one who came back to thank God?" Then Jesus told the man, "You may get up and go. Your faith has made you well." (Luke 17:11-19, Contemporary English Version)

As I think about this story, I see in my mind's eye a group of men who live on the border, in a kind of no-man's land between Samaria and Galilee. They have a common misfortune to have caught the dreaded disease of leprosy. Some have lost their fingers or toes; some have lost parts of their noses. The normal enmity between Judeans and Samaritans has been overcome by their common circumstances. They are all outcasts.

They cannot come close to Jesus because it's forbidden for a leper to have close contact with anyone who is clean of the disease. Instead, they shout to Jesus to have mercy on them.

Can you imagine a picture that looks less like wholeness? They shout out to Jesus because they want wholeness. They want to be restored.

What does Jesus do? Does he touch them? No. Does he pronounce any special words? No. All he does is tell them to go show

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themselves to the priests, because it is the priests who have the power to pronounce them lepers or not lepers – able to be part of society, or to be outcasts from society.

And it is not until the men with leprosy leave Jesus and go toward the priests that they are healed.

From that point on, all we know is that only one of the ten men returned to thank Jesus. That one was a Samaritan, a foreigner. But I imagine in my mind's eye what might have happened to the other nine:

One may have realized he was healed and stopped by a pond where he could look at his own reflection. Yes, he was healed, but he was so amazed he couldn't move from the spot for a long time.

The second one, on realizing he was healed, could think of nothing but his family. This meant, if the priest gave his blessing, that he could go home to those he loved! And so he ran to the priests.

The third one, in my mind's eye, just truly couldn't believe that he was healed. He was a skeptic, and he just didn't think this could be true, therefore it wasn't true. He had gone along with the others when they went to see Jesus, but he really had no hope of being healed, and now he went back to the leper's camp and logically tried to figure out what must have happened.

The fourth, fifth and sixth lepers were good friends, and had set out to go together to the priests, and helped each other discover that they were healed. Together they realized that they had feeling in their hands that they hadn't had for a long time, and so they stopped to feel the texture of grass and rocks and each other's clothing, all the while weeping with delight.

The seventh one, convinced that there was a power here beyond what he could understand, just kept repeating the words of Jesus, "Go show yourselves to the priests." Over and over, he said the words as he almost blindly wandered toward the nearest place he might find a priest.

The eighth and ninth, also good friends, had had leprosy so long that they knew they could not return home. Their families had long given them up for dead. So they imagined what other possibilities lay before them now, and they decided that they were in a position to advocate for those with leprosy; to be go-betweens between lepers in the scattered leper colonies and their healthy family and friends. With a new kind of joy, they decided to make a new life for themselves helping others.

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Jesus, in healing those men with leprosy, gave them shalom. And even without imagining, we can know that their shalom would have looked different for the different men.

Jesus wants us all to be whole, to have shalom. And it's going to look different for each of us. But in some measure it is possible for each of us right now, and yet to a greater extent as we grow in Christ's grace. Amen.

The Old Testament book of Job asks the question, "Why is there suffering?"

The New Testament asks the question, "How can I ignore the suffering of others?"