

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
Sunday February 4, 2018 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: Isaiah 40:25-31
Mark 1:29-39

Sermon: Healing our Un-wholeness

There was a medical study done about the power of prayer some years ago in the United States. The study involved a group of people living on the east coast, whom we will call the pray-ers. Then there were two groups of people who were experiencing similar kinds of illnesses. About half of those people were on the east coast, in close geographic regions to those pray-ers from the first group. Half the prayers were given the name of someone they knew and asked to pray for them every day. The other half were living on the west coast, who had no proximity or acquaintance to the individuals who were given their names and asked to pray for them.

For those of us who inhabit church communities, it might not come as any great surprise that the people who experienced prayer by someone they knew had a notable improvement in their health and it also improved their quality of life, compared to those who were being prayed for by an someone they did not know, or compared to the general public who were ill, but not part of the study.

But the people who experienced the most improvement in their general well-being and quality of life were those who did the praying, it didn't matter who they were praying for.

Over the years, I have been part of a number of faith communities who believe in the healing power of prayer. Some of those groups equated « healing power » with a medical cure. For those groups death, or continuing illness meant a failure: a failure in our style of prayer, perhaps, or a weakness in our beliefs or maybe even that there was some faith-based flaw in the person doing the praying that impeded the healing power of God.

Other groups I have been part of believe that healing power can be experienced in many different ways, and they see healing in many different outcomes, sometimes even death. In those groups healing is not about a medical cure, it's about wholeness. Restoring wholeness, discovering wholeness, even momentary glimpses of wholeness that lightens a difficult journey through illness.

Today's healing story takes us home. You can almost imagine Peter saying to Jesus: "Don't screw this up, man. This is the mother of my beloved. I'm already in trouble because she doesn't like me following you all over the place. If you mess up with my mother in law, I am dead meat. I can never come home again."

This is perhaps an opportunity for healing at its most profound level. For it touches and places at risk not only the one who is being healed, but the one who is the healer as well.

This healing does not take place in the synagogue, you see, or on the road, or in a public place. It takes place in the home. It reminds us that Jesus' gift of healing is for real people, doing real things, in real places.

And yet even though things are ordinary, so ordinary on the surface, when Jesus took the woman's hand and raised her to her feet, Mark uses the word "egeiro". Because she was an ordinary woman in an ordinary place, we translate that word saying "she stood up" or "he lifted her up." But the word "egeiro" is the same word that the gospel writer Mark will use later on, in chapter 16, for Jesus' own resurrection. This is their common ground, the meeting place between an ordinary housewife and the holy man: "egeiro – be lifted up!" so that God can heal your un-wholeness and rescue you from death.

In the gospel stories, Jesus rejected the notion that physical or mental illness were God's punishment for sin. Jesus' understanding seemed to be that God's intention for the children of the earth is wholeness, regardless of physical challenges. The **real** obstacle to wholeness and healing was the community's fear of illness or difference.

And when this woman, whose name is not recorded, but whose story is told three times, when she rose in that little hint of an Easter still to come, what did she do? The gospel tells us she served them, Jesus and his friends.

We don't know exactly what that meant – whether she fed them or cleaned up after them or washed their feet. Over the years a lot of us have taken a feminist lens to that passage, and noticed how quickly things went back to the old hierarchy. I mean, just because she was on her death bed didn't mean she got out of doing her chores.

But perhaps, for her, to serve Jesus and the disciples meant that she was returning to her whole life – that she had been healed from her un-wholeness, and was returning to life as usual – and nothing said "I'm back" like a table spread with an abundance of God's gifts.

And it's a good thing she fed them. Because that evening they brought Jesus all the un-whole people in the community. Everyone they could find: children who were physically ill, old people who couldn't walk, men and women who were possessed by demons, people without a blemish on them, but who were so wounded deep in their very souls that they were barely alive.

They brought them all to Jesus. All the ones the community had given up on, all the ones they thought were without hope, all the oddities who were feared and pitied and excluded.

And Jesus raised each one to new life, *egeiro*. He healed their brokenness, not just in their bodies, but in their relationships, in their families, in their community. He healed their un-wholeness and introduced them to the new common ground: that meeting place between their everyday life and the holy healing love of God.

In the gospel Jesus knew that his own wholeness was critical for healing others. In the last verses of this story we see that Jesus did not deny his own need for healing. With no explanation, Jesus rose at dawn, and found a quiet lonely place "and there he

prayed.” Jesus may have been the healer for many, but he knew that he too was in need of a strong and healthy connection with God.

Perhaps, like Peter’s mother-in-law, prayer and solitude was what Jesus needed to do in order to say “I’m back.”

When we look at the world around us, we see a world in need of so much healing. Healing from the un-wholeness of poverty and violence. Healing from the un-wholeness of exploitation and sexual misconduct. Healing from the un-wholeness of what we have damaged in our physical world and our global family.

We can’t always pin our hopes on the absolute cure. World peace and a cure for cancer are wonderful things to pray for – they would represent a real victory over death.

But sometimes we need to recognize the little Easters that are taking place along the way. The way we can lift one another up just by being there, by representing belonging in a community and holding out the promise of God’s holy love.

We need to create and to cultivate those meeting places where we as ordinary people, in all of our brokenness, can meet the wholeness and the holiness of God’s healing love. We may do it best around a shared table, or maybe in a time of quiet prayer. We may do it sometimes by dancing in the aisles, or by serving others. We may do it by offering the gift of music or the gift of words or the simple offering of a caring presence.

God’s grace is best shared through a community that expresses itself in love. May we be that community, not in these walls, not one day a week, but wherever we go. Amen.