

Thomas R. Cook
The Church of Saint Stephen the Martyr – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 and 10:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost; July 19, 2015

“Wholeness Begins with Wholeness”

Scripture: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56; 8 Pentecost B, Proper 11; RCL

So, a lot of things happened the last time I went to see the doctor. You all know the drill... Poked and prodded in about every way imaginable. “Does this hurt? How about this?” Needles, stethoscopes, samples. EKG. Lights in my eyes. Blood pressure cuffs swelling on my arms, on my ankles. Deep breathes. Now open wide and say “Ahhh.” And all this when I’m actually feeling well!

But I can assure you of one thing that absolutely did not happen last time I was with the doctor: I did not reach out to try and touch the fringes of my doctor’s lab coat, so I could be healed. In fact, I did not try to touch the doctor in any way at all. That would be weird. And as much as I appreciate my doctor, I was glad to get out of there as quickly as possible.

So, if mine is a contemporary story of a visit with a healer, it sure is a far cry from the work Jesus was doing back in the day. Can you imagine?

Everywhere he went, every place he visited, crowds of people awaiting him with all manner of illnesses. More crowds of people bringing other people who couldn't see, couldn't walk, couldn't speak. And it's like they were stalking Jesus, anticipating his movements, showing up before he arrived in towns and villages. He was a sort of celebrity; he couldn't go anywhere without people wanting to see him, to touch him, to be made well by him. So what did he do? Well... he let them. In his deep compassion for them, he stayed with them, taught them, healed them. He let them touch the fringes of his cloak. And it wasn't weird at all. It was the right thing to do.

We might say our healing arts have come a long way since Jesus' time, --and we would be right--- but in some ways I think we are now really coming around to accept something that Jesus knew already about healing some two thousand years ago. Imagine what it meant to have a visible illness in Jesus' time... that overwhelming cough, that fever, that rash. That limp or sore or blindness or deformity. To be sick or mentally ill was often to be cast out of society, out of home and family. People believed you might be cursed for some wrong you had done. You might be shunned and belittled. No work, no hope, no company except the company of other sick people.

But then came Jesus. He didn't avoid the sick and the outcast. He didn't treat them as cursed by God. He didn't separate himself from those who needed his help. And I think it is because he deeply understood that *healing doesn't just end with wholeness, but healing begins there as well*. He treated people well from the start; it didn't matter who they were... the sick, the sinners, the leaders, the common people. The first thing Jesus did to help people be well was to be with the people who were not, to treat them with the dignity and compassion they needed as fellow human beings, to hear them, to see their grief and pain, to care for them, sometimes to challenge them. From that place of compassion, Jesus went about his work of healing, and people touched his clothing and found hope in his caring presence, and the Bible says they found healing.

So much of Jesus' life is about removing the barriers that we build to separate us from one other, whether for misunderstood illnesses or religious beliefs or differences in race or politics or status. Jesus took care of others. And I think this caring is at the center of who we can be and who we need to be as communities of faith in Christ. We become a community for healing and hope, a gathering where people find dignity and wholeness and wellbeing, a

people who practice compassion in a really tough world. And it starts by caring.

A part of the mission of St. Stephen's Church is to be a community for the soul, a people and a place of healing for the sad, the confused, the ill, the unsure. And these people need not all come to us; we can take this healing out with us wherever we go... at work, or play, in neighborhoods, and cities, and schools, and homes. In ministries like Outreach, or Befrienders, or Youth, or VEAP, or 66 West. And also just by greeting that person this morning that you do not know. Or praying for someone in a time of trouble. Who knows? Your welcome of someone here today, your prayers, or your invitation to a friend or coworker or neighbor to join you here some Sunday morning, may be the very thing that provides healing for them, though you did not know they needed it. And it may be the beginning of new healing for you, though you did not know you needed it.

Jesus had compassion on the people he saw who were like "sheep without a shepherd." No one to care for them, no one to bring them together. And he showed his compassion by caring for them and healing them. That's the kind of compassion all of us are called to share.