

5 Epiphany B 2018
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St. Matthew's Kellers Church
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Grace, mercy and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

In the Jewish community of Jesus' time, illness meant sin. If you were sick, it was because you or someone else sinned. We hear the assumption that sin causes illness in Job, that ancient poem of the Old Testament, where Job's friends continually blame his sin for his illness and other woes. We hear the assumption that sin causes illness most clearly in John's gospel, in chapter 9, when Jesus is about to heal the man who was blind from birth – and his disciples ask, "Who was it who sinned, this man or his parents?" It must have been sin that caused the blindness. That was the only way Jews thought of illness in those days.

Illness also meant ostracism. If you were sick, you were not only avoided by those in the community who didn't know you very well, but you were also shunned even by those closest to you. For you were "unclean" according to the Jewish purity laws. If you sat on a chair, then anyone who sat on that chair was also "unclean." That meant they couldn't worship or touch anyone else until they had performed the ritual cleansing. Which was a big bother for people who needed every hour of the day to eke out a living. So those who were sick were avoided by their own families, as well as by the community.

Illness also meant poverty. If you were a fisher, no one else wanted you in the boat with them, or touching the same nets. If you were a shepherd, even other family members didn't want you touching their sheep. If you were a farm worker, no one wanted to buy your produce. Your illness made you eligible to glean in the fields after the farmers had come through harvesting. That was the only general assistance, the only social security disability there was then.

Illness meant you were not whole. You could be only part of what it meant to be human.

But Jesus came to bring change. Jesus came to bring God to the world. Jesus came to bring wholeness wherever wholeness was absent. That is where the word “healing” comes from, to be made whole.

Consider what it meant to be healed in Jesus’ day: your sin was removed, you were welcome to take part in community activities, you were able to be employed. You were able to worship. You could sit and eat with your family. You didn’t have to live in poverty any more. You were welcomed again, as a whole person.

In Bible times, illness was a sign of sin. Healing was a sign of God’s forgiveness, God’s grace, God’s love. Jesus’ healing was the same as Jesus’ message: God has come to touch everyone. God loves everyone. Even the sinner. And God wants everyone to know and experience God’s love. Especially those who have felt separated from God and other people, who feel like they are only half persons.

Jesus healed Simon’s mother-in-law by touching her. He took her hand and lifted her up. He risked becoming unclean, he risked taking on her illness, her ostracism, her poverty, her sin, with that brief touch. He knew that, yet still he touched her.

In that deepest part of ourselves where we hide our sin, our illness, our lack of wholeness, Jesus comes to touch us, to take us and lift us up. Jesus risks taking on that most horrid of our sins, that would make others ostracize us, that puts us in poverty, that keeps us out of community. He does that to bring us the message of God’s love, of God’s longing for us to be whole.

I knew a woman who had cancer. She had surgery and then took treatments for many months. She was quite sick. One day she found out, as she suspected, that

the treatments were not making a dent in her cancer. She decided to stop taking the treatments. But still, Jesus was there to touch her, to lift her up. It was obvious that Jesus had been there to touch her, to make her feel God's love for her. Her faith and trust in God was strong, even though she knew she was going to die from her cancer. She was a vital part of her community, still – every week when I went to visit her, she had at least one other visitor, and clean dishes on the table ready to return to others when they came back to visit or to bring another meal. Her family came often, one son every day, a daughter twice a week. She was not healed of her cancer – she died of that 18 months after she stopped taking treatments – but she had been made whole, she was living as a whole person, one who was touched by God in every aspect of her world.

The healing that comes from Jesus' touch is not a cure for cancer – but it is a cure for living our lives only in part. God became human in Jesus to enter fully into what it means to be human. Jesus broke the boundary between heaven and earth. Jesus continues to break those boundaries through us and whatever healing we can be a part of. The healing that comes from God is the healing that brings us back to God and back into our community, that takes away our sin, that keeps us from being impoverished – the healing from God is the healing that makes us whole.

Amen