

Pentecost 2, Year A
Matthew 9:35-10:8
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In the Jewish Bible - what we call the Old Testament - along with forgiveness of sins, healing was seen as the surest sign of the presence and the power of God. Where people were healed, there was God, and there was God's rule and kingdom. Psalm 103 summarizes a theme that runs throughout Jewish literature: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits - who forgives your iniquity, who heals all your diseases." Elsewhere in Isaiah the relationship between healing and the presence of God's kingdom is made even more explicit, as in chapter 35 where the coming of the kingdom of God will bring renewed fertility to the land and as well, "the eyes of blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy."

This relationship between healing and the presence of the kingdom is thematic in Matthew's gospel. He makes the connection in chapter eight with the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, along with many others, chapter eleven with the response to the imprisoned John the Baptist, and here. Curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, casting out demons, is the proof that in Jesus "the kingdom of heaven has come near." Whether that healing is psychological, as in the case of the Gerasene demoniac, or physical, as in several

instances, is not the big issue. All of it means that in Jesus the presence of God and God's kingdom is here.

Today we have lost that connection between healing and kingdom. To be sure, many people associate healing with God, but even there most of the time the healing must be inexplicable by modern medical models, or defy the odds of recovery in some spectacular fashion. Even those who still connect at least some healings with God usually do not make take the further step of connecting it all to the kingdom of God. Perhaps it is because most people who talk about the kingdom are referring to the idea that at some point in the future God will initiate an indescribably horrible cataclysm that will, in the end, vindicate the good and destroy the evil once and for all. In the meantime the kingdom is not here; we must await it patiently just as people have for the past 2,000 years and more.

From my point of view this is unfortunate, for the practical impact of the dominance of such images of the coming kingdom is that the whole concept becomes irrelevant to modern people. Only when we reestablish the connection between healing and the kingdom's presence will we be able to see that not only is the kingdom here right now, it is the one thing that represents the greatest hope for humanity. I see this being worked out both at the individual and the national level, and even at the global level.

I have spent a lot of time in my career working with people addicted to various drugs, usually alcohol, but many others as well. Addiction is a terrible

disease that when untreated destroys not just the addict but the family of the addict as well. Most of us know this. Though it is not curable, most of us know as well that people can enter the long process of healing generally called “recovery.” When people begin to recover they get their lives back, they learn once again to love and to be loved, to forgive and to be forgiven. Community with others is restored, and as often new community is formed. In the bible when that happened people called it “the Kingdom of God,” and I believe we would be well served, and serve the world well, by calling it the same thing. Don’t look for some strange event in the distant future to find the kingdom, just talk to a grateful alcoholic and see the clear evidence of the kingdom’s presence.

Modern medicine has vastly improved both the length and the quality of life for people who can take advantage of it. It has also led most of us in one way or another to imagine that the human body is a self-regulating machine that usually can be fixed if interventions are appropriate and early enough to enable the body’s natural healing powers to work. As a result, seeing the presence of God and God’s kingdom in what appears to be naturally occurring process is far less common than it once was. Too bad. It means we don’t notice what they noticed, that the natural process itself is a sign of God’s providence and presence. Where healing happens, there is God. That is true even when the healing that happens is that a person comes to grips with her own mortality, her own sense of loss and grief, and in the end gives up on everything except the one thing that matters most, the presence of God. The kingdom draws near not just when

people are physically healed, though that is a sign of it, it also draws near when people find themselves loving more deeply and fully, experiencing greater connection and closeness, whether physical healing occurs or not.

The connection between healing and kingdom goes well beyond the individual situations we all face. Most people today believe our country is sick, though just how sick and how to heal us is disputed. We need look no further back than last Wednesday to see further decisive evidence of our disease. Gun violence is one important manifestation of our illness, and the remarkable level of polarization besetting Congress is another. Many of us believe the increasing income disparity between the richest and poorest Americans, and the inability to overcome, or even face, our racist history, should be added to the list. None of this looks much like the Kingdom of God, all of it convinces most of us that we have serious problems.

True enough, what divides us up by marginalizing some and privileging others is not the kingdom, not now, and not 2,000 years ago. The places where that kind of division was overcome is now, as it was then, a sign of the presence of the kingdom. Most of us don't look at Brown vs. Board of Education as a sign of the kingdom. But from a biblical perspective that is exactly what it is. Most of us don't look at the Civil rights and voting rights acts of '64 and '65 as signs of the kingdom, but again, from a biblical perspective that is exactly what they are. There is still a heartbreaking amount of racism in this country, as there is still a heartbreaking amount of all kinds of discrimination here. Where we see

divisions being overcome, whether by Federal mandate or personal conversions, scripture is clear; this is the presence of the Kingdom.

This country has historically not been good at providing health care for all our citizens. We all know that, regardless of what any of us imagine the solution ought to be. That we are struggling to find a solution to this problem is a sign of the presence of the kingdom. No one in Congress I know of believes the poor should be allowed to die without medical care, not the most liberal, not the most conservative. We have reached a point where overwhelming majorities of our people believe everyone should have access to health care; the question is how to do it.

In scripture when nations begin to take care of their poor, that movement is hailed as a sign of the kingdom, and we can notice that same sign here in our day. To be divided over how to achieve this goal is a very different and more positive problem than to be divided over the question of whether or not the poor should even get health care in the first place. We have moved from being a country that didn't believe any provision should be made for poor people to get health care to being a country where that is a nearly universally shared priority. That change, in biblical terms, suggests the kingdom has drawn near.

Yes, we are a very long way from a solution to health care access for all, and the last thing I want anyone to believe about this sermon is that I believe we are about to enter some sort of paradise. Nor am I suggesting that we need to change the subject and start talking about "what's right with America." On the

contrary, I see a very long, very hard road ahead of us in the quest for genuine equality in this country, and there will be lots of suffering by lots of people along the way. That is how it is now, as it is how it was 2,000 years ago. But just as 2,000 years ago, healing of people, healing of relationships, healing of priorities, were interpreted as signs of the presence of the kingdom, so now we can observe, if we will but notice, the same things going on. It is rough out there folks, and in the midst of the roughness, the callous indifference that seems to characterize this age, healing is taking place, healing within and between individuals, and healing within and between communities. That healing is just as surely a sign of the kingdom now as it was when Jesus walked the earth.

Just as Jesus told his disciples to proclaim the good news of the nearness of the kingdom through healing, so too in our day has the risen Christ given us that same task. Proclaim the healing you see, proclaim the healing you help bring about in whatever way you do it; for now, as then it is as a sign that the kingdom of God draws near.