

“He Took Our Infirmities”

Sermon prepared by the Rev. Douglas Clark for August 23, 2015 – Ordinary 21

First Congregational Church, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.” He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. Then Jesus said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”

When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.” And he said to him, “Do you want me to come and cure him?” The centurion answered, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.” When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith....And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.” And the servant was healed in that hour.

When Jesus entered Peter’s house, he saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever; he touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve him. That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.” --- Matthew 7:29 – 8:17

Matthew's narrative of Jesus' ministry moves from Jesus' **teaching authority** (in the Sermon on the Mount) to Jesus' **healing power** (chapters 8-9). Jesus exercises power and authority over physical illnesses (leprosy, paralysis, fever) and over mental illnesses (demon possession). He reaches out (both literally and figuratively) to people at the margins: a leper; a Roman soldier's servant; a woman. He disrespects the boundaries that have been established by reputable religious leaders: boundaries between disease and health, between Jew and Gentile, between slave and free, between male and female (Galatians 3:28). Jesus heals both by touch and by word.

“The very first healing is the healing of a man with leprosy. Leprosy here may refer to any number of skin diseases and disfigurements of varying degrees of contagion. For the victims it meant not only dealing with the physical suffering of the disease but also with exclusion from the community (Leviticus 13-14). It was prescribed that lepers live outside the city or in their own separate houses.” (When Mary and I visited Robben Island in South Africa, our tour bus took us by the site of a former leper colony.) “If lepers went out they had to call out 'unclean' as a warning to any who might encounter them.”¹

These ancient practices and assumptions may seem outdated to us—until we recall some of the responses last year to the outbreak of Ebola. Like some forms of leprosy, Ebola is a highly contagious disease. Some of the health care professionals treating Ebola patients also came down with the disease, although most health care professionals did not. Sadly, some politicians in our country engaged in bipartisan fear-mongering last year when American health care professionals returned home after caring for Ebola patients in West Africa.

Both the Democratic governor of New York and the Republican governor of New Jersey decided to quarantine these American health care professionals. In one infamous incident, Kaci Hickoks, a nurse from Maine, was forced by the governor of New Jersey to live in a tent on the grounds of a hospital in New Jersey. When she was cleared by New Jersey authorities and returned to Maine, the governor of Maine ordered that she be confined to her home.

In a strongly worded editorial at the time, the New England Journal of Medicine was highly critical of this politically-motivated quarantine policy. “This approach,” the editors wrote, “is not scientifically based, is unfair and unwise, and will impede essential efforts to stop these awful outbreaks of Ebola disease at their source, which is the only satisfactory goal.”²

1 Anna Case-Winters, *Matthew*, 127.

2 N Engl J Med 2014; 371:2029-2030 November 20 2014. Accessed online on 08/16/15 at <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMe1413139>.

Jesus crossed a dangerous boundary when he physically touched the man with leprosy. There was the physical danger that Jesus would then be himself infected with the disease. But there was also the spiritual danger: he has now made himself unclean.

Jesus crossed another boundary when a Roman military leader accosted him. (The term “centurion” means that this man was in charge of one hundred soldiers.) “This man is an outsider on three counts: he is a foreigner, an enforcer of Roman imperial rule, and a Gentile [that is, a non-Jew].”³ If he had wanted to, this centurion could have ordered Jesus to carry his full military pack for one mile. But instead, this military man, who is accustomed to giving and receiving orders (“I...am a man under authority”), submits himself to Jesus' authority.

Think for a moment how shocked the crowds must have been when they saw a Roman soldier submitting to the authority of a Jewish peasant. In South Africa during the apartheid era, no member of the military or the police would ever have submitted himself to the authority of Oliver Tambo or Steve Biko or Nelson Mandela.

Jesus' first response to the entreaty of this Roman soldier is an “expression of hesitation.”⁴ :The Greek sentence structure in the text indicates a question, 'Am I to go and cure him?'”⁵ Do you want me to go and cure him? Why would Jesus be hesitant to accede to the soldier's request? Jesus says at least twice in Matthew (10:6; 15:24) that God has sent him only to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel,” which would exclude any kind of mission or outreach to Gentiles. Furthermore, if Jesus were to enter the house of a Gentile and touch a Gentile who is seriously ill, he would be rendering himself unclean on two counts.

The Roman centurion, perhaps recognizing and understanding Jesus' hesitation, as well as admiring and respecting Jesus' authority, offers this option to Jesus: “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed.” So Jesus “speaks the word,” and the servant is healed. (I heard an interesting twist on this biblical verse on Tuesday, when Mary and I were attending her Aunt Ann's funeral service at St. Virgil's Roman Catholic Church in Morris Plains, NJ. As a part of the liturgy, the priest said, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my *soul* will be healed.”)

The first two healings in chapter 8 of Matthew take place outdoors, when Jesus has “great crowds” following him. We may call these “faith healings,” since the man with leprosy kneels down before Jesus (a sign of faith) and the Roman centurion submits himself to Jesus' authority (another sign of faith). The third healing, by contrast, takes

3 Case-Winters, 127.

4 Case-Winters, 128.

5 Ibid.

place indoors, when Jesus is apparently alone in the house with Peter's mother-in-law. Nothing is said directly in this story about her faith. Jesus takes the initiative by touching her hand, and the fever leaves her, and she gets up and begins to serve him." The Greek verb in Matthew's narrative that is translated "serve" means "to serve as a follower or disciple," not "to wait on." Healing leads to following, to becoming a disciple. Her action is a sign of her faith.

Matthew wants the reader to know that these healings are not only signs of Jesus' power and authority. They are also signs of prophecy being fulfilled: "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases." This quotation is a reference to the image of the suffering servant of God in Isaiah 53:3-5:

"He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."

Most Christians through the centuries—from the first century to the twenty-first century—have interpreted Jesus' death on a Roman cross as fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy. And because of the verbal image, the word picture, that Isaiah created in these verses, most Christians through the centuries have viewed Jesus' suffering and death through the lens of atonement theology: on the cross, Jesus was wounded for **our** transgressions, crushed for **our** iniquities. Christ died for **our** sins. By his death we are made whole, and by his suffering we are healed. Christ on the cross is "the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

By contrast, when Matthew cites this verse from Isaiah—"he took our infirmities and bore our diseases"—he is not focused on the atonement of Christ on the cross, but rather on the healing ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. And therein lies a profound theological and ethical difference. In Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus takes our infirmities, he's not dying for our sins. He's fully sharing our sorrows. In Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus bears our diseases, he's not the atoning sacrifice for our sins, or for the sins of the whole world. He's fully sharing our struggles. Not only does Jesus share our infirmities and diseases: the Beloved Son of God also fully shares the "sting of death," so that death is "swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:55, 54).

For me, at this point in my life and ministry, the significance of Jesus' life and death and resurrection lies not in the atonement, but in the incarnation: Jesus is the Word become flesh, the Beloved Son and Living Word of God, the One who fully shares our human life. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Godself, and entrusting to

us, the followers of Christ, God's own ministry of reconciliation. In the words of one of my favorite theologians, H. Richard Niebuhr,

“Jesus Christ is for me, as for many of my fellow Christians, the one who lived and died and rose again for this cause of bringing God to us and us to God and so also of reconciling us to each other and to our world. The establishment of this friendship is to me the key problem in human existence.”⁶

In the final scene of the 1984 Academy Award winning film *Places in the Heart*, “all of the characters present during the movie gather together in church, those living and those who have died. They are intermingled, with the killer sitting next to his victim, the white racist next to the black man he mistreated, all sitting in places where they would not have been during their lives. They partake of the Holy Supper. The bread and wine pass from one to another.” The bread is in small white cubes, the juice in individual cups—just like in the typical communion service in our church.

Commenting on this scene, Presbyterian pastor Melinda Bresee Hinnners writes: “Suddenly we know what faith is, even as we know we cannot explain it. In one powerful scene, we see what Christ accomplished for us on the cross.”⁷ We see the real presence of the kingdom of God. We see the trajectory of reconciliation fulfilled.

6 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, pp. 43-44.

7 Melinda B. Hinnners, “Close Call,” *The Christian Century* 119 no 12 Je 5-12 2002, p 21. Accessed online on 06/24/2014.