

“Standing in Body and Spirit”

A sermon delivered at St. Andrew’s United Church

by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman

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Readings: Acts 3:12-16; Psalm 4 (VU #727); I John 3:1-7

Much has been written about Christian views on healing, and in particular how healing was a focus of the ministry of Jesus. While Jesus lives a focus of teaching, preaching and healing, we ordain people in the United Church to word, sacrament and pastoral care. We commission diaconal ministers to education, service and pastoral care. Healing is nowhere to be found.

In fact, in a seminal book written over 40 years ago, Morton Kelsey from Notre Dame University argued that over 1/5th of the gospel narratives speak about Jesus’ healings, including the commentary surrounding such events. They take up more space than anything else in the gospels.

Now as one who has pointed out for almost as long as Kelsey that Jesus speaks about money and possessions and our personal assets more than anything else in his parables, this was a helpful corrective when I re-read those words this week.

Jesus may have taught about how we use what we have, but his healings were a way to show what was ultimately important in our lives.

In that same book by Kelsey are recorded these controversial words: “Modern medicine owes its greatest debt not to Hippocrates but to Jesus. It was the humble Galilean who more than any other figure in history bequeathed to the healing arts their essential

meaning and spirit. Physicians would do well to remind themselves that without His spirit, medicine degenerates into depersonalized methodology, and its ethical code becomes a mere legal system.

“Jesus brings to methods and codes the corrective of love, without which true healing rarely is possible.”

These words are not the voice of Morton Kelsey, spiritual teacher and Episcopalian trained lay theological scholar then teaching in one of the most prestigious Catholic universities in the world. No, they come from Dr. J. W. Provonsha, a medical doctor himself writing about “The Healing Christ” in a medical journal over 50 years ago,

So what is the essence of Jesus’ healing? The discussion in Acts is the aftermath of a healing by the disciples – a beggar who had no future, ignored by the people of the village, gets up and walks. He has new life, and celebrates his joyful transformation by clinging to the disciples, esp. Peter, who seems to be the lead person in the story.

We see such stories, do we not, regularly – someone is in a serious car accident and they eventually recover, but it is very special when they can thank the paramedics, doctors and nurses who were a part of their recovery. The very opportunity to say “thank you” by the person injured, and the opportunity for the emergency and health-care workers to hear how much their efforts meant to the individual they helped, can be a dramatic and life-changing experience for both the medical staff, and the individual whose life was on the line.

But a detailed look at many of these cases reveals people still have deficits and disabilities that may limit the scope of what they can do. They may need to find different work, or not work at all. They may no longer be able to carry their young children, or hug their grandchildren; they may need to have someone carry their groceries, or wrap their Christmas gifts, or a host of other things. Yet they celebrate their healing and their new life.

Disingenuous? Hardly. A ruse to the rest of the world? Not at all. Their life was endangered, and they were restored to significant health and wholeness, but most of all they were connected again to family, friends and community. Healing for Jesus, and I would argue for all of us, depends upon finding wholeness in community.

The United Church of Canada is receiving at its General Council this summer a report from a Comprehensive Review Group established in 2012 to look at new ways of being the church for the future. The report is being discussed across the country, and will be a significant piece of discussion not only leading up to the General Council, but at the 8 days meeting of General Council and beyond.

It is difficult to trivialize or marginalize the importance and potential impact of that report.

But I hazard a guess that another smaller, less known report may have one of the greatest impacts in the church's life long term, at least at the congregational level. It is a report from a working group asked to develop a Theology of Disability report.

The report going to the General Council is entitled Theologies of Disabilities, because early on the group determined that, first of all, "disability" is not a category any more than "normal" is a category.

And secondly, there are many ways (certainly many more than one way) to express the realities of where God is in relationship to those with disabilities.

And so the term “theologies.”

When a request for participation in the working group went out, 17 applied for two spots. So dramatic was the response the group expanded by 2 members to receive the input from those interested. When a request for personal stories went out: “What would you like to tell the church over coffee about your experience as a person with a disability, a caregiver of a disabled person or an ally of people with disabilities, over 150 pages of stories were received.

And each story came back to one simple fact – the desire to find a caring and accepting community within a local congregation. Some were powerful stories of being accepted and encouraged in the church, despite not being able to do many things others could do, but still being able to make a substantial contribution through their presence, their smile, their enthusiasm. Others spoke of dark moments in their spiritual journey where they felt rejected, ignored, even dismissed and treated as if they were uniquely filled with sin due to the disability of themselves or a loved one with whom they attended church.

So the healing of the beggar in Acts – what happened? We do not know. We are told he could walk now and could not walk before. But the essence is he was accepted into community. Reluctantly, no doubt, for we accept change with difficulty, especially dramatic change. Yet one left to beg and to be treated as less than human finds a way into the community – maybe for the first time in his life. That is true healing.

Gary Zukar was a popular writer and best-selling author on the New York Times list at the end of the last century. In his book *Soul Stories* he writes in one of the chapters: “The most important thing of all is to bless everyone all the time.”

He then relates an experience he had in Hawaii.

‘Around the man’s neck was a necklace of fresh flowers. His sandals were simple and well worn. “Think about what you can bless every time you meet someone. It may be his smile or his gentleness or intelligence. She may be a mother or a nurse or someone who makes people feel good about themselves.”

‘His hair was graying, but his vitality captivated everyone in the room.

“There is always something about everybody that you can find to bless. When you are looking for it, you will find it.”

‘He smiled broadly at his audience. “Just in case,” he continued, “I am going to give you an emergency blessing you can use even if you don’t find one thing about someone to bless.”

“Tell yourself,” he said slowly, “his exhalation feeds the plants.” ‘

The key to what Zukar says is that you can’t judge and bless at the same time.

Healing is a blessing – an affirmation of the goodness of life in general, and of each individual life in particular.

Whether or not we can stand in body, we need to create the conditions in which people may stand in soul and in spirit, and know they are accepted into community.

Such a stance is blessed by Jesus – and it is good.