

"Surprising Healing"

As you read through the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament, they depict Jesus having spent a tremendous amount of time healing people. It is surprising who Jesus heals, usually those whom everyone else had given up on. In this morning's story, Jesus and his followers cross once again the sea of Galilee to Gennesaret. It is here that one of the most vivid healings takes place. It is not in this morning's story. It is alluded to with the full story elsewhere in the Gospels. It is the healing of a man possessed by demons. He lives in the tombs. In his agony, he runs around naked. Jesus calls out the demons which fly into a herd of pigs and the herd charges down the hillside, over the cliff and into the Sea of Galilee. It is a dramatic story. It is a surprising story.

I tell you this story because I think that there are times when we all need to come to Jesus for some sort of healing whether it be spiritual or physical or in our relationships or in our addictions. There are times in our human lives when it seems as if our soul is so fragmented that we wonder how we are going to find wholeness again. Those times when you can't stop the tears from flowing or the angry voice yelling from somewhere deep down inside. Can God really surprise us with a healing?

The people of Jesus' day saw sickness as a punishment for sin. However, Jesus rejects this notion that sickness was God's way of getting even with sinners. He seems to have seen sin as a kind of sickness when, at the outset of his ministry, he says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick do. I came not to call the righteous but sinners. (Mark 2:17). The Hebrews of Jesus' day believed that the body and soul were entwined and that if something goes wrong with either, the other is affected. In Greek the word *sozo* was used to mean both "to save" and "to heal" and the word *soter* could mean either "saviour" or "physician."

There are a couple of things that have struck me about Jesus over the past few weeks. First, he manages to calm a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is there when the disciples are frightened, thinking that the boat is going to be swamped with water and sink. The other thing is that Jesus goes to the other side of the Sea of Galilee to Gentile territory and he heals some very unclean, impure people. Jesus seems to be continually crossing boundaries whether they be geographic, ethnic, or religious. He is continually going to the other side of the tracks and popping up where you wouldn't expect him. So maybe we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus heals a man full of demons in Gennesaret. One commentator writes, "Nothing...is kosher, everything is unclean: the spirits, the tombs, the pigs, the territory." Jesus risks contamination and condemnation for the life of this one man.

This man has a storm raging inside him. He lives in the tombs. He's a dead man walking. He's possessed by demons that drive him wild. This man is so possessed that he can't even see that he is possessed. The one thing he begs of Jesus is for Jesus not to torment him. He knew

nothing else but his tragedy. He was so possessed by the demons that he didn't know what freedom was or what it was like to be truly healthy.

Jesus heals this man. The unclean spirits dive into a herd of pigs that end up drowning in the water. I have always wondered what the farmer who owned the pigs must have felt. We do know that the people don't praise God for this miracle, but instead are angry at the destruction the Jesus has brought. The healing was brought at a cost to others. If I were Jesus, I think I would have chosen a different way to dispense with the unclean spirits. Why the pigs? I think that Jesus is demonstrating that when healing comes about, there is a cost to us or to others.

I have worked with people who are in the Alcoholics Anonymous programme. Step five in the twelve-step programme is that you have to speak with a spiritual guide. One of the other steps is to make a list of all of the people you have harmed and to go and make amends. The demon of alcohol is gotten rid of through a spiritual path, believing in one's higher power, but there is a cost. So many times, a person would go to make amends and find they were totally shut out or refused forgiveness. There was healing but it also came at a cost. Or I have seen a couple in a relationship where one person has been enabling the other in an addictive behaviour and then a healing comes about and the relationship which had become based on enabling suddenly breaks down because the enabler can't deal with the healing.

I think that there is a word of caution here to those of us who are in church leadership positions. So often we can see that the church, whether it be the local congregation, or the national church, needs to change in one way or another as it follows the will of God and how many times have we heard the cry, "But we will lose people." And so, the will of God, the healing and restoration of those who are on the outside, is tossed aside as we seek to please those who are on the inside. I was fortunate to have in one of my previous congregations the man who had been the president of the Canadian Council of Churches following the Second World War. Even at the age of ninety he was always encouraging the church to be courageous and step outside itself in its ministry. When he was president of the Council, the Council took the courageous step of extending the olive branch to Jewish organizations in Canada by opening up conversation on theological issues. He said that they knew full well that they would lose church members if they took that step and they did. I wonder if there are any things the Spirit has placed on the Church's agenda where we have heard the cry, "But we will lose members!" Sometimes one has to be brave to receive the healing of Jesus.

The man who had been possessed by demons stands healed. What is going to happen to him now? The demon-possessed man turned into a disciple. This man who at first had begged Jesus not to follow him, now seeks to be with him. However, Jesus, looking at the man who has now been healed and saved, gives him the responsibility to proclaim, "how much God has done". Jesus is calling him to go and be a witness, a preacher, in the city. His healing is to bring about a major shift in his life. Now freed, he is to go out into the world. He is not going to be allowed a life of contemplation at the feet of Jesus. To him, the cost of the healing is the call to active discipleship. He is called to serve. His healing, his salvation, empowered him to do new things. I am sure that prior to the healing no one around would have thought that this demon-

possessed man would be the one called to go and preach the Gospel, the Good News of what Jesus has done, but here he is. The healing has made this man a new creation with a new reality. Hearing the words of Jesus can come at a great cost.

A new creation suggests that something has changed. I like to close each church service with a benediction that begins with the words, "Now may God who creates in the world and in our lives..." as a reminder that God has not finished creating any one of us. God is a creator always creating something new. When God creates in us we are often given the eyes to see things in a new light. We see the world with God's eyes. I love the saying that when I wake up in the morning, I am torn between the twin desires to just sit back and enjoy God's good creation and the desire to go out there and change and reform the world.

This morning, I think God is inviting us to be the bridges of healing between God and people in our lives and in our world and even our very selves. Most of us have been brought up in the empirical, scientific world which sees healing as coming from outside ourselves, but prayer reminds us that we ourselves have the ability to bring about healing.

The miracle of prayer is that it opens up a channel between ourselves and God and someone else if we are praying for them. People in my lives who are difficult, situations in my life that are challenging, I pray for them and over time I find that they are not that difficult or in my time aside with God the spirit seems to give me new tools for dealing with them or the situation. Prayer can as simple as, "God, this is the situation. Please help me deal with it." Don't try to feel too religious or think that you have to bring about the healing yourself. Just open yourself up to be a conduit, a pipeline between God's power and the situation. And remember that if God doesn't seem to be giving you what you ask, maybe God is giving you something else. Look for it. The invitation this morning is to be open to God's surprising healing.