

April 14th: Heal (*Acts 3:1-10*) – Pastor Heather McDaniel

Our Scripture reading today comes from the Narrative Lectionary—a year-long collection of readings that help us trace a particular theme throughout the Bible’s big story: the theme of “Love in Action.” In each week’s passage, there’s a compelling action verb embedded in the narrative, which we’re invited to ponder and practice. Of course, we know that *love* is the most important verb of all, and that every action we do is rooted in God’s boundless, active love for us and for all creation. And our ultimate goal as we come to God’s word and let it speak to us is to increase in love towards God and each other, love that’s lived out so that our world can receive and reflect it. Please pray with me before we dive into our text.

God of healing, thank you for creating, loving, and caring for the entirety who we are: body, spirit, soul, and mind. We pray for your restoration and wholeness for us and our communities and world, and we ask that as we listen to and live out your word, we might become apostles of healing like Peter and John. Amen.

I’ve been a part of a few discussions over the course of my life about the superpower I would select if given the chance. Although I used to pick flying, as I’ve gotten older, I’ve become more and more convinced that healing would be my superpower of choice. I grew up on the compound of a small leprosy and tuberculosis hospital in rural Bangladesh, where my parents did community health and development work. I was surrounded by human beings whose lives were shaped by profound trauma, poverty, and sickness – and who profoundly shaped me. By the time I was 13 and my family moved to Kenya, I had decided what I wanted to be when I grew up: a physician, who could go to remote places with where there was no doctor. Finally, I would be able to do something concrete to fix the suffering that I had encountered. I was certain, *convinced*, that I had found my calling.

That certainty began to change in high school. Not only did I find advanced science and math tedious, but I also began to realize that a Western, doctor-centered model of healing didn’t bring full health to a community. I began to pay attention to what my dad and his colleagues were doing: mobilizing churches in East Africa to address the burgeoning AIDS crisis, as well as the confronting brokenness and destruction caused by civil war in Rwanda. But what really challenged my path towards medicine was when my church, Nairobi Chapel, produced a kids’ musical, and I volunteered to be Blooper the

dog. I was the only white *mzungu* (foreigner) in the cast and I was playing the *mbwa* (dog), and audiences howled with laughter at my canine embodiment. Our final performance was at a Nairobi orphanage. The children silently gathered on the packed dirt of the compound, then sat emotionless through the show. I tried to ham it up, but the kids didn't even laugh at my physical dog humor and yelps. I looked into their faces, and they were blank, joyless, traumatized, and hopeless.

I went home shaken. These children had adequate shelter and medical care, clean water and food. Yet they were not at all well. They needed trauma-informed care: stability and family and community and love and hope and play, and I realized that nothing I would learn in medical school could restore them to full health and wholeness.

As I reflected on the children and their haunting eyes, I realized that it wasn't medicine I was called to, but healing, the kind of healing that I believe is bound up in the holistic mission of the church. I began to wonder what resources the church, as a called-out community of Jesus-followers, has to uniquely offer to restore people to full health. Almost thirty years after I took my final bow as Blooper, it's a question that continues to animate and pester me.

When I've told this story before, the takeaway for some Christian listeners is that I realized that caring for people's souls was more important than caring for their bodies, so I decided to be a pastor rather than a doctor and just married one instead. That's not my message, but people hear it that way because our mindsets and language are shaped by Western dichotomies: medicine treats bodies, religion tends to souls. Think of the songs we sing about Jesus – they're largely about his love for a generic "me," or his love for my soul, spirit, or heart – "Jesus, lover of my soul," "Christ laid aside his crown for my soul", "Long my imprison'd spirit lay", "I will open up my heart and let the Healer set me free."

And as much as I love these songs, they're not what I think the gospel writers would have composed about Jesus. At least one-third of the narrative portion of Mark, Matthew, and Luke describes Jesus' bodily healing work, but we don't have a lot of songs or sermons about Jesus' love for our bodies, or the fully embodied wholeness that Jesus, our enfleshed God-with-us, preached and lived out and restored to people. We tend to understand "salvation" as the healing of our souls, the unmerited gift of grace that reconciles us to God and grants us forgiveness of sins and eternal life, and that's true – but that's not all.

There's no indication that Jesus, or the early Christians, reduced salvation to our souls. Biblical salvation is holistic and all-encompassing, and its goal is the full restoration of all creation and all of us – body, mind, spirit, relationships, and soul – beginning right now and reaching completion in life after death. The Greek words *soteria* and *sozo* are often translated “salvation” and “save”, but they also mean “healing” and “to heal,” – in fact, that was the most common use in ancient Greek – to save (*sozo*) meant to heal a body from disease, and physicians were saviors. The Greek word *sozo* is used in the gospels to describe Jesus saving people from their sins *and* healing a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years, saving rather than judging the world *and* raising a dead girl to life again. *Sozo* is used when Jesus casts out demons, frees Zacchaeus from greed and economic corruption, saves the disciples in the midst of a storm, and heals the sick wherever he goes – it's only modern translators that decide to use “heal” in some instances and “save” in others. All of these diverse uses of *sozo* describe the holistic healing and saving work Jesus came to do, and the vocation he gives to his followers.

After Jesus' resurrection, he appeared to his disciples in a locked room, breathed the Holy Spirit on them, and commissioned them: “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you” (Jn 20:21). Jesus called his followers to enact the same holistic salvation that he had, mediating God's health to the world. And that's exactly what you see Peter and John doing in Acts 3, soon after the Holy Spirit descended and filled the gathered followers of Jesus, when they went up to the temple to pray and encountered a lame man who asked them for money. Because of the disability he was born with, this lame man was not considered “whole”, and was therefore barred from entering the temple court. He was not able to be a full member of the worshipping community.

Part of devout Jewish faith was to give alms to the poor, which is why this man was stationed at the temple gate – if he couldn't go in, at least he could have his survival needs met by those who could enter. And in the verses right before this, the newborn church pooled their money and resources to meet the needs of everybody in want, so Peter and John could probably have accessed it to help this man. Or they could have preached the gospel of Jesus to him, inviting him to confess his sins and join their new fellowship. But they were sent as Jesus was sent, and as they encountered the needs and brokenness of their world through the lens of the indwelling Holy Spirit, they were able to see people in a new way and imagine new possibilities. And when the man asked them for money, the first thing they did was to stop and look straight at him – the Greek word used here implies an intent and earnest gaze, not a passing glance. And when they looked intently with Spirit-focused eyes,

Peter and John didn't just see a lame beggar – they saw a complex, embodied human being, they understood what he needed to be whole, and they knew the particular gift they had to give, as apostles of Jesus' healing salvation. And they responded with word and deed, invoking the name of Jesus to heal as Jesus healed. I love the way the man responded with pure joy, using his restored legs and ankles to walk and leap and praise God as he finally entered the temple courts to become a full part of the worshipping community. The Scriptures say in Acts 3:16 that through Peter and John's faith, Jesus gave the man complete healing – wholeness, completeness, soundness in all his parts. When Peter and John defended their actions in 4:19, they described the man's physical healing with the word *sozo* – he was saved. By Acts chapter 5, the apostles' healing ministry became a floodgate – people brought the sick in from towns all around Jerusalem to receive Jesus' healing salvation mediated through his Spirit-filled apostles.

The early Christians became a community of those who, like the man at the temple gates, had been saved and healed by Jesus, and their mission was to preach, teach, save, and heal as he did. As the early church grew and spread across the ancient world, so did their healing outreach, especially to the poor. Early Christians believed that every single body had intrinsic worth because each person bore the image of God, who had become incarnate in a human body, and intentionally identified with the poor and sick. Lay Christians actively sought out the needy to provide holistic care, which included prayer, physical care, and medical remedies. In fact, almost everywhere a church was founded during those early centuries, it became a focal point for the free care of the sick, a ministry seamlessly integrated with caring for widows and orphans, aiding the poor, visiting those in prison, and extending hospitality to travelers. No other religious or social groups at the time offered anything comparable – valuing bodies considered poor and sick was completely countercultural in the Greco-Roman context.

The early church's healing outreach was particularly conspicuous during epidemics, which may have killed a quarter to a third of people in the Mediterranean world in the second and third centuries. When others fled to the hills, Christians developed a reputation for courageous compassion and staying put to care for the dying, often at the cost of their own lives, and even when they were enduring persecution. This was a key part of their compelling witness to the world.

I believe from the very core of my being that we, as Jesus' body in the world today, are still called to be apostles of healing to the world. We still have

something specific and unique to give that can help to restore holistic health to embodied human beings. If we are Jesus' followers and are sent as Jesus was sent, then healing is our superpower. We cannot follow an enfleshed Savior who honored our bodies and physically connected himself to our humanity without honoring, affirming, protecting, and caring for the bodies around us. And like Peter and John at the temple gates, the first thing we must do is to look intently at those around us, *seeing* them in all their complexity, whether they're a person asking for money at a street corner or somebody in our church community – and this takes relationship, humility, and hard work. Looking intently means seeing beyond the presenting needs of others, like the lame beggar's request for money, and understanding why those needs exist, and what's causing them. We must discern what is needed in order to move towards wholeness and full health, and we must know what we can uniquely give, as individuals and as a Spirit-empowered church, in partnership with medical and mental health and community providers. Peter and John brought healing to the lame man by strengthening his legs so he could fully participate in his community, but for somebody who is differently abled today, wholeness and healing might look like becoming the kind of community in which they can fully flourish and be valued and whole and participate just as they are. That kind of intense seeing cannot be done with just one pair of eyes. We need each other's perspectives, and we especially need the perspectives of those who see from a different vantage point, who come from a different background and context than our own. Finally, we need the Holy Spirit to open our eyes in the same way that Peter and John's were opened.

What health needs would we identify in our community if we took the time to look intently? Since 2018, deaths from alcohol and opioid abuse have steadily increased in Kitsap County, suggesting that more and more people are struggling with addiction. A recent countywide survey of youth showed a rising rate in reported depression and suicidality over the last few years, particularly among female youth, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and youth identifying as multiracial. 17% of male youth, and more than 1 in 5 youth who identified as LGBTQ+ or multiracial felt they had no adult to turn to when they felt sad or hopeless. On the other end of the age spectrum, 1 in 5 of people over age 65 in Kitsap live alone, many of them experience isolation, and the overall suicide rate in Kitsap County is highest among seniors. So many people in our communities, from youth to seniors, are *not* being clearly seen by those around them, and they are not in caring and inclusive communities. They are in crisis, and they're not going to be restored to health by our health care system alone. We need to learn to look intently and see

those around us, like Jesus and Peter and John did, with Spirit-focused eyes of compassion and clarity.

When we do see in that way, we will be compelled to respond in word and deed. I want to name and affirm the many ways we already extend healing here, from our Little Blue Pantry and blood drives that tend to people's bodies, to fellowship hour and small groups that offer community and the chance to be seen and loved, to our hosting of Oxford House, which provides addiction recovery, to our Loaves and Fishes book group that wrestles with some of the root issues of systemic inequality and injustice that lead to unhealth. And I want to call us to expand how we see and respond together, to continue to explore how we can live as a healing community.

Next time you read the New Testament, and especially the gospels, I challenge you to substitute "health" and "heal" each time you see the word "salvation" or "save," then read the verses aloud. Since the original Greek carried both meanings, you'll be hearing those words closer to the way the gospels' first recipients did. See if that new reading and listening begins to change the way you think about Jesus' salvation being not just for our souls but for all of us as whole, embodied, flesh-and-blood and dust-and-breath human beings, and remember how much your own body matters and is worthy of care and respect. Jesus loves our bodies and came to save them, and we must love our own and each other's bodies just as seriously.

But I also want to leave you with three questions, which I hope we can continually return to as a church. Good questions are like midwives – they help us do the hard and painful work of bringing new things to birth – maybe that's why Jesus was over 40 times more likely to ask a question than to give a direct answer. First: When you look intently at those you encounter over the course of your daily routine, what health needs do you see – and why? Make a list. Maybe your answers will reveal that you need to ask more questions or do some research, or that you need the perspective of others in order to see clearly. Secondly, what might full healing look like in each situation? Use your imagination, but also think about, or ask, what full health means to those you're seeing. Finally, what do we, as a Spirit-empowered community who are sent as Jesus was sent, to save and heal and restore, have to give in response to what we see? What are our particular assets? What are we called to? I pray that these questions will pester you in the same way that they have pestered me since I was a teenager crawling around in a dog costume on the dusty ground of a Nairobi orphanage. And I pray that as we respond to them together, we might become known as a community of people who are being

healed together, and who together reflect and extend God's gift of healing to a broken world.