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Resource Centre

Sermon

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Healing: good news, troubling question

2 Kings 5: 1-14; Psalm 30; 1 Corinthians 9: 24-27; Mark 1: 40-45

Three of the four texts for today deal directly with physical healing. The Corinthian text relates indirectly.

The passage from 2 Kings is full of fascinating, ironic drama. Much of life is ironic as illustrated beautifully in a story Tym Elias used some time ago. A man was building a tavern in an alcohol-dry community. The church prayed that the project should fail. Lightning struck the tavern and burned it to the ground. When the owner sued the church, the church returned a plea of not guilty. The judge then said that regardless of the final outcome, one thing was clear; the owner of the tavern believed in prayer; the church did not.

A strong, respected Syrian general is doomed by leprosy. A Jewish slave girl captured by those same Syrian troops is confident that a Jewish prophet can heal the husband of her mistress. Ironically it's conceivable that the same general is responsible for her captivity. Naaman then travels to enemy territory with horses, chariots, servants and a load of gifts to the enemy king with a letter from the Syrian king requesting him to cure Naaman of his leprosy. The King, the leader of the nation is horrified at the request, realizing that he cannot heal. Ironically the prophet, often not appreciated by the civil authorities, comes to the rescue. Then there is

no indication that Elisha gives God credit when Naaman is healed. Ironically, it is Naaman, who gives the God of Israel all the credit and vows to serve no other god in the future. Wow what a story! That we could so crank around the confidence-bloated generals and presidents of our day to recognize and obey the true God!

The writer of Ps. 30 thanks and praises God for having healed him. It was probably healing of a serious sickness because he has been on the verge of death where, as he says, the dust cannot praise God. This healing, he says, "has turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and filled me with joy." He encourages everyone to praise this God.

The Mark passage again tells the story of a person being healed of leprosy. Does Mark see only the leprosy and not the rest of the human? He simply refers to him as a leper. We still have too much of that. When the man kneels before Jesus and begs to be made clean, the Revised Standard Version says, Jesus was moved with pity. Other authoritative texts use the word "anger" rather than pity. One commentator says there could be several reasons for the anger: anger that the leper broke the law in approaching people, anger that he expressed doubt in "if you will," or anger at the interruption of Jesus' ministry, but probably anger at the disease.

Whether it was anger or pity, Jesus restores the man to health.

I'll comment briefly on the Corinthian passage later.

I have referred in an earlier message to how helpful I have found Perry Yoder's study of the Hebrew and Greek words in the Bible which are usually translated by some form of the word "salvation." Yoder found that the majority of those cases dealt with physical and material well-being. When I took the trouble to check his references, I was pleasantly impressed, but only slightly surprised. My reading of Scripture has long led me to believe that God desires shalom that is peace and well-being for the human race. Food, clothing, shelter, health, celebration and laughter are to be the norm, not the exception for all people. To have this confirmed by a careful word study was gratifying. We therefore assume that health and healing and not sickness is the will of God.

I'll also share a bit from R.H. Harrison's findings as he looked for scriptural understanding of healing and health. He says that frequently we think of health only as the absence of disease, but a state of clinical health involves definite positive considerations also. He says that it is not necessary for all parts of the body to be absolutely free from disease for a person to be in a state of clinical health. The normal degeneration of aging tissues may render the harmony of body and mind in a minor key. (That's why I so often feel a bit off key, off centre) He says that the Hebrew word shalim, translated healthy or whole is nearly the same word as shalom, frequently translated peace. This again suggests strongly that healing and health are more than the absence of disease. Rather it is a state of the body and mind where all functions are being discharged harmoniously. That is the will of God for creation. This is good news. When we pray, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, we are in part praying for such wholeness, such harmony.

The establishment of wellness centres in our society is also a recognition that healing and health are much more than the setting of broken bones or extraction of tonsils or not experiencing a heart attack or not having flue.

The ideal in early Hebrew society may well have been David, the son of Jesse. He is described as one who can play the harp, is a brave warrior, is good looking, can speak well and the Lord is with him. (1. Samuel 16:18) That is raising he bar rather high and would rule out a significant

portion of us.

Here is a little aside. Contemporary Russian women are a little less demanding. The Current on CBC radio reported two weeks ago that President Putin enjoyed an 80% popularity rating. When the reporter was asked why Putin was loved by most young women, he said that Putin didn't drink, was a family man and had strength of character. Men, I think we can come a little closer to that level of the bar. Apparently the former President, Yeltzin, hadn't stacked up so well in those departments.

The disturbing part about the perception of the ideal person in Hebrew society is that the people with obvious blemishes were considered inferior and barred from certain offices and even from the community. The perception that sickness was a direct punishment for that person's sin was at times still evident in Jesus' disciples. Jesus, however, according to the Gospel record, never despised the sick and the weak. In our Mark story Jesus says I choose to help you and he healed the man of his leprosy. In fact at one time Jesus said that he had come not for the whole or healthy, but for the sick. There seems to have been a deep conviction that disease and disharmony was not an established part of the divine order of things. Jesus went about restoring people to that original, God-desired state of wholeness, of well-being.

Some things we can do for ourselves to improve healing and health. The fourth scripture passage for today, 1. Cor. 9: 24-27 emphasizes self control, self-discipline. Paul says that athletes exercise self-control in all things in order to obtain a perishable wreath. He says he does it in order to obtain an imperishable one. There is ample evidence today that self-discipline can also help us with our own health and healing. Diabetes is becoming a scourge in Manitoba, particularly amongst certain groups. It in turn causes complications in various body organs. I heard a Dr. Goldberg impatiently contend that at least one type of rampant diabetes, diabetes II could easily be prevented if people would simply exercise more and eat wholesome food rather than the readily available junk food. This is not quite the emphasis the Apostle Paul had in mind, but if salvation largely deals with physical and material well-being, then it does not violate the text to apply it this way. Of course, diabetes isn't the only form of unhealth brought on by choices we make. Some cancers, sexually transmitted diseases, stress-related diseases etc. are often related to forms of lack of self-discipline, self

control. Health may be a temporary wreath, but a very important one.

In Bethel Place, where I now live, we have a part-time nurse-in-residence, Karen Barkman. She tries to help residents help themselves with healing and health. She has practical suggestions for health of body, mind, spirit and emotions. Proper foods, fresh air, exercise and cleanliness will aid physical health. Mental health can be aided by stimulating the mind, fostering positive relationships, by laughing and not taking ourselves too seriously. Health of the spirit can be fostered through observing the various aspects of beauty about us and by being thankful. She has practical suggestions for taking control of our emotions rather than letting them control us.

This brief capsule does no justice to Karen's insights. I simply use it here to illustrate further how a medically trained person perceives many ways in which each of us can contribute to our own healing, our total well-being.

Some things, however, are largely or totally beyond our control. There is ample evidence that income and health are closely related. The areas of lowest income in Winnipeg consistently experience poorest health according to studies done by the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy and Evaluation. Furthermore, in 1998 Manitoba's officers of health urged the province to raise the minimum wage saying that the current rate contributed to the depressed health status of the working poor. The medical officers pointed to 40 studies linking poverty, unemployment and unequal distribution of society's wealth to poor health. Likewise, the World Bank has found that "the best health is in societies in which the spread between the richest and the poorest is smallest, not in societies with the highest mean or average incomes." The same point has been made by the World Health organization. In 1996 two Canadian scholars said at a meeting that we need to be concerned about the widening gap between rich and poor in Canada, about the diminishing middle class and about the fraying of the social safety net because of its negative effects on health and well-being.

(white pages Web site # 27 & pink pages report of Jan. 29, 1996)

Level of income is largely or totally beyond the control of many people and therefore it is up to others to assist the poor and to work for greater equality through personal sharing, through congregational action, through church structures such as MCC, through government legislation,

through lobbying governments and international bodies etc. Many other things are beyond our control including the bodies we inherit.

An obvious and very troubling question is this: If healing is the will of God for us, why are some people still smitten by serious illnesses, by lack of wholeness even though they have exercised self control and have done the positive things Karen Barkman and others have recommended and are not counted among the impoverished? Why, for example, must my wife continue for over 40 years to experience nearly constant aches and pain and limited energy from debilitating rheumatoid arthritis? Why do some people experience miraculous healing of disease and others continue to suffer or die? Did the miraculous types of healing done by Elisha, Jesus, Peter and Paul happen only at certain times in history when God chose to reveal divinity in a special manner and at other times nature takes its course? That in part is the conclusion I've come to. If you sneeze your cold germs on me, I probably catch a cold and God does not intervene miraculously to prevent it. Wiser people than I have tried to answer that troubling question. Perhaps there is some help in the book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Harold Kushner or other books of the kind. I can't answer it. I wish I could.

Here is something that helps me when I stumble over this question. I'm satisfied that God wills wholeness, shalom, not illness and lack of shalom. In every case recorded in the Gospels where Jesus was asked for healing, he healed. When we are involved in bringing healing, wholeness to others via medical help, financial help, friendship, careful listening etc. we are doing the will of God.

Then there is a mysterious, ironic aspect to lack of health. Many people who have experienced serious illness speak of deep personal gain which they could not have had without the undesirable trauma. Kathleen Kern in her book, *Amazing Grace* cites the example of her husband's mental breakdown landing him in hospital in the US. Then she realized to her dismay that he had earlier canceled their health insurance. Then came the realization that her husband's breakdown might be a good thing. He had been hiding his depression. She writes that "now that the lie had been split wide open, and he had really broken, there would be a chance for him to heal." The following days and weeks family, friends and medical people had become specially close to her. She had learned to pray

the Psalms. She experienced a state which she describes as “not resignation but a vigilance that allows a person to recognize that whatever comes is a gift from God.” (pp. 34-36). There are people in this congregation who have had such profound experiences with God during times of critical illness that they would not wish to undo the illness.

There are apparent contradictions here, paradoxes. The 17th century English poet, John Donne, saw paradoxes in much of life. He creatively expressed some of these paradoxes in his sonnets. For example, he pleads with God,

That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me and bend

Your force, to break, blow, burn and make me new.

(Batter my heart)

Throw me down so I can stand? break me to make me new? So much of life is most clearly seen as paradox, apparent contradiction. Serious difficulties can lead to new insights or character building. Often good comes out of evil and we believe that God is at work there.

And finally, how can there always be total healing or complete health? It is appointed unto people once to die. Would we want to go on forever in these mortal bodies? With the Apostle Paul we look to the time when this mortal will take on immortality. Meanwhile it is better to grapple honestly and long with important questions than to settle quickly for easy, but false answers.

