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### Becoming Whole

Matthew 4:23-25, James 5:13-18,

During the summer of 1990, the issues of health and wholeness suddenly became deeply personal. While on a family camping trip to the Great Smokey Mountains, I developed a drooping eyelid. That led to a hasty trip to my internist, a battery of tests, and a neurologist delivering the diagnosis, "You have an auto-immune disease called myasthenia gravis, and we've scheduled you for surgery because we've found a tumor on your thymus gland." My immediate reaction was disbelief – I was young, in excellent health, and a long-distance runner. How could such a thing happen? Fortunately the surgery was successful, and I've had no recurrence of the symptoms. But I learned first-hand the truth of the adage, "If you've got your health, you've got just about everything."

We're all deeply concerned with issues of health and wholeness. Few things shake us more deeply than a shadow on an X-ray, waking up with chest pains, or developing some unexpected symptom. So we're preoccupied with staying well – we resolve to quit smoking; we pound out miles on a treadmill or elliptical machine; we give up Johnsonville Brats for tuna fish and tilapia. Nevertheless, sickness does come to all of us; and when it does, it causes anxiety and a desperate hope for healing.

The good news is that there are connections between our inner resources of faith and both healing and health. An undeniable linkage exists between our minds and bodies. Illness often follows periods of depression, fear or some emotional trauma like divorce, loss of a job, or the death of a loved one. Conversely, hospital patients recover more quickly when their rooms face the out-of-doors, when they feel connected to the outside world. Healing is enhanced when an anesthesiologist visits a patient before surgery to answer questions and calm fears. Norman Cousins was convinced that his recovery from cancer was greatly aided by the emotional support he received from family and friends and by his laughing uproariously at old Marx Brothers' movies.

We shouldn't be surprised that faith enhances health. Matthew describes Jesus' ministry this way, "Jesus went throughout Galilee . . . healing every disease and sickness among the people. News spread and people brought Him those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, epileptics and paralytics, and He healed them."

The gospels record seventy-two accounts of healing. They tell how Jesus sees an invalid, his body wasted by thirty-eight years of paralysis, lying by the pool of Bethesda. Jesus looks at him intently and asks, "Do you want to get well? Will you put aside your self-pity and rejoin the living?" The man nods, and so with a ringing voice of command Jesus says, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." And at once the man is cured.

Such healings continue in the early church. Peter heals a man crippled from birth as he and John attend afternoon prayers at the Temple. The man is so ecstatic that he begins to leap and praise God. The apostles perform signs and wonders among the people and are soon deluged with urgent pleas for healing. Crowds gather from towns around Jerusalem bringing their sick, and many are healed. During Paul's final journey to Rome, he heals the father of the chief official on the island of Malta. Then "the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured." James writes about healing against this backdrop.

James' words are confident and reassuring. He strongly connects prayer and healing. Sadly this text has sometimes been used to set the physical and spiritual against one another, as though we are to simply pray, lay on hands and have faith, rejecting modern medicine. But if God is the source of every good and perfect gift, then He uses doctors and nurses, C-T scans and lasers, pharmaceuticals and technology to further our healing. The ground for healing is most fertile when we combine a physician's care with prayer, medicine with the will to live, and technology with faith.

Our text leads some to assume that we will be cured if we have enough faith. But we're all mortal; life is a terminal condition. Death is, in fact, the ultimate healing for our physical infirmities. James includes a deliberate ambiguity in our text, "And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will *raise* him up." The word "raise" means to be physically healed, as when Jesus tells the paralytic, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." But it also suggests resurrection as when Christ "rose" on Easter Sunday. Death for the Christian is the ultimate healing.

In my first parish, a vibrant young college student died of a brain tumor. We held prayer services, offered love and support, and our youth group even fasted for a day. But nothing changed the course of Bruce's illness. Finally, he died. That tested my faith. I didn't understand why God didn't cure Bruce!

Over time, I realized that we must distinguish between God and life. God doesn't give illness. Life does that. I realized that Jesus' death on the cross is not only about our forgiveness, but a demonstration that God shares our suffering. God understood the anguish of Bruce's family. He too lost a son. We saw ways that God was at work – support given by old friends, a community gathering together to offer help, prayers that gave the family the strength to persevere. We saw families rethinking their priorities, and all of us were reminded that life is both fragile and sacred.

And I remember the words of the senior pastor as we officiated at Bruce's funeral. He said, "We've been asking – why? We don't know. Life is not fair. But rather than ask, "Why?" perhaps we should ask, "What now?", trusting that God shares our grief, will give us strength, and promises that we will see Bruce again.

So we distinguish between "healing" and "curing." Healing can come in forms other than the physical. In the midst of illness, we can discover peace of mind. Prayer can lead to

reconciliation and the restoring of relationships. In the midst of illness, we can discover emotional and spiritual resources that we didn't know we had.

James is convinced that our faith offers a number of resources that contribute to health. For example, he says, "Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise." Praise is an outpouring of emotion; it is the affirmation that life is good; it expresses to God our thanksgiving for His presence, love, and grace. It is a way of putting aside negativity and pessimism so we can live in wonder and joy. And, while we have no guarantees, this state of mind helps keep us in good health. Surgeon Bernie Siegel argues that the key to recovery from cancer isn't so much resisting death as it is learning how to live, finding genuine peace of mind in our everyday existence.

Psychologist Victor Frankl was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. He realized that his captors could control every aspect of his life except his attitude. So he tells how, during a particularly dark time, "I pictured myself in a warm, pleasant room giving a lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp. I pictured the attentive audience and the comfortable upholstered seats. My troubles became simply the object of an interesting study." Frankl attributes this positive directing of his thoughts as the key to his survival. He was determined to count what blessings he had, as few as they were, because he believed the words of Proverbs, "A cheerful heart is good medicine."

Then James underscores the importance of community. "Are any of you sick? Then call the elders of the church to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Lord . . . . Confess your sins to each other so that you may be healed." In the ancient world, the sick were isolated. Sickness was often blamed on sin, so blindness or paralysis was viewed as God's judgment. Before Jesus heals the man born blind, his disciples ask, "Who sinned? This man or his parents?" Not understanding germ theory, or how diseases travel, lepers were cast out of community, forbidden to come within 50 feet of another human being.

The sick are still sometimes isolated. When I visited my son Erik when he was teaching in Tanzania, one of his fellow teachers took me to a home for former prostitutes with AIDS. I noticed how local residents kept their distance from the home, walking quickly on the other side of the street, as though drawing too close, even to the home itself, might mean risking contagion.

But James encourages contact with the sick, and hearing each other's confessions. While we need to be selective with whom to share, we know intuitively that when our insides are in turmoil, nothing is more helpful than a good cry and a listening ear. When we're sick, we need prayer. We need tangible signs of love and concern. We need friends to listen to us. And suppressing an unpleasant truth or living in a way that violates our conscience will probably have physical consequences. Confession is good for the soul!

Finally, James underscores the importance of prayer. In the context of healing, he

mentions prayer no less than seven times. He is urging us to bathe a sick person with prayer: to pray that medical personnel have wisdom, to pray for family members to have the courage to talk openly, to pray for the patient to find faith and hope, and to pray for the patient's healing. In essence, we pray believing that the same healing power that was available during the ministry of Jesus is available today.

But the context of our entire passage is "community," the importance of sharing a supportive, encouraging interdependence. Earlier in this chapter, James talks of working together in community, patiently sowing the seeds of faith, love and patience. He talks of not grumbling, but staying positive so we can bring out the best in others. James insists that community is rooted in integrity – that our word be our bond, that our "yes" mean "yes," and our "no" mean "no." As he closes the chapter, James defines friendship. In his words, a friend is a person who brings back someone who is wandering from the truth. "Don't write them off," says James. "Go after them and get them back."

We've been preaching a series of sermons on "authentic faith." We've spoken of how authentic faith shows itself in deeds – in loving relationships, in forgiving those who have hurt us, in caring for those on the margins – the night-shift waitress, the custodian, the homeless man pushing his grocery cart. We've spoken of the power of words – to heal or to harm. This morning we think not only of health and healing, but of how a faith community helps us find wholeness.

The "feel-good," inspirational story of this year's baseball season, besides the Cubs being in first place, has to be the story of Texas Rangers' outfielder Josh Hamilton. A former number one draft pick who was given a \$4 million dollar signing bonus, Josh fell into a downward spiral of alcohol and crack cocaine use. He tells of waking up in a filthy trailer, or in the cab of his pickup, and praying, "Lord, take me away from this nightmare of my life." He tells of wandering down the center of a two lane country road outside Raleigh, so high that he was oblivious to the cars whizzing by on both sides.

He went through rehab eight times and collected 26 tattoos. His wife kicked him out and he thought he'd never see his two daughters again. One of his worst moments came when he had a dream that he was fighting the devil. He kept hitting him and knocking him down, but the devil kept getting up. Finally he was exhausted and the devil was still standing. Josh feared that that was a parable of his life.

What happened? His grandmother confronted him. His last rehab has worked . . . so far. At his own insistence, he is tested for drugs every three days. He doesn't carry more than ten dollars. He stays accountable to his wife, and to a companion who travels with him on the road. He prays and does daily Bible Study. And he is among the American League leaders in home runs, RBIs, batting average, runs scored, and even assists.

Josh's story is the story of community – of a tough-talking grandmother, of a wife who stuck with him when she had every reason to walk away, of friends who didn't give up on

him, of fans who applaud his honest courage, of the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. Will he make it? It depends on him, but it also depends a bit on us.

When we pray for one another, we promote healing – for ourselves and the one for whom we are praying. When we visit the sick, we promote healing by offering a tangible sign of love and concern. When we join in worship, lifting our attention to God, counting our blessings, our focus is drawn away from ourselves to what is good and positive about life. That promotes health and wholeness. When we lovingly confront a friend who is going astray, when we listen to the deep secrets and burdens of another's heart, we promote healing. And when we point someone to Jesus Christ, we are pointing them to the One who is the great Physician.

Healing and health are mysterious processes which we don't fully understand. But we give thanks that each of us can be a channel of healing by our love, touch, listening, and presence. Most of all we give thanks that our Lord has been and remains the Great Physician. Thanks be to God!