

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
February 15, 2009
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Worship Theme: Healing that Transforms
Psalm 30, I Corinthians 9: 24-27, Mark 1: 40-45

Have you ever been through a healing that transforms you? I suspect that almost all of us here have been healed of something from a simple cut to the common cold. Others of us have also experienced healing that resulted from surgeries to the ongoing healing from some form of cancer. From what I have learned being fully healed or cleansed of a cancer often involves a difficult long range diagnosis. Some of you continue to live with it in your body. I guess this is why people who have been inflicted with cancer are called "survivors," and rightly so. Regardless of the difficulty of the disease or injury we have suffered, has the healing, to whatever degree, transformed or changed you markedly in some way?

Today's scripture lessons illustrate healing that transforms or changes a person markedly. Let's begin with Psalm 30, a prayer of praise to God. The writer of Psalm 30 tells a marvelous story of a transformational healing he or she had experienced at the hands of God. Verses 6 and 7 set up the story. "As for me, I said in my prosperity, 'I shall never be moved.' By your favor, O LORD, you had established me as a strong mountain." At one time, this person was literally feeling like they were on top of the world. Have you ever had a time when you felt that way? Was it ever like the psalmist, who at one time, "gave no thought to the prosperity and/or health that characterized life at the moment. Since life was sweet, there was no reason to suspect that it would ever be any other way." The attitude was that life was good, and God was good, if indeed God was really needed for life to be so prosperous. This attitude is very much like the false pride and prosperity much of our world has lived in the past few years.

Suddenly, for the Psalmist, it all changed as reflected in the simple words, "you hid your face; I was dismayed." The Psalmist was struck by a terrible illness. "What the psalmist" and all who prospered "failed to realize was that health and happiness are signs of God's compassionate presence, and it was not until God changed the conditions of life ('you hid your face') that the writer understood the full meaning of human mortality." The psalmist finally realized that he or she was practicing the sin of overbearing pride or arrogance, and was forced to make an "admission of human impotence. Only in the face of misfortune did the psalmist understand the full meaning of his or her own life." God's compassionate presence is essential to our lives.

Oh, misfortunes can come to us in so many ways, not just in illnesses, but in the loss of loved ones, loss of a job, divorce, estrangement from family and etc. Unfortunately, some people blame God for all these problems and turn away from God. They will not confess to their sin of arrogance and admit that it was only by God's grace-filled presence that they had any prosperity and good health in the first place.

When misfortunes hit, we can look to the psalmist's example of how to respond. He or she was hit with a deadly illness that nearly sent him or her to sheol, the place of the dead. The psalmist expressed the realization that holding on to his or her false

pride of self-sufficiency would only contribute further to his or her own annihilation. The palmist now understood that if he or she continued to blame God or others for their misfortune and hold onto their anger, it would eat them alive and make their existence a living hell. “When the very bottom of human experience loomed into view, the psalmist turned to the only resource available: God. ‘To you, O LORD, I cried’ (v. 8) marks a pivotal moment in the life of the psalmist’s prayer, for the powerless one has now begun to tap into the ultimate source of power, the compassionate presence of God.

As a result of tapping into the ultimate source of power, God, the psalmist is healed and his or her life is transformed in a remarkable way. “In a sense, then, the journey is complete. The psalmist has now been restored to a state of wholeness, but in the process he or she has been permanently changed. There is a new appreciation of divine power and of human weakness. More importantly, there is now a new understanding of God’s love and of the dependence of men and women on it.” The psalmist realized that his or her life in good and bad times belonged to God, not to his or herself. Their life depended upon the steadfast love and care of God, not their own self-sufficiency. And so we have the words and emotions of praise of the Psalmist at the beginning and end of the Psalm. “O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.” (vs 2, 11-12) (*Texts For Preaching—Year B*, pg. 146)

Are we willing to turn to the only resource available—God, when life is good and when it is bad in order to tap into the ultimate source of power so that we can experience the healing that transforms? If you do, then you know how sweet it is.

The lesson from Mark is also a great illustration of how sweet it is to tap into the ultimate source of power, God, so that we can experience the healing that transforms. “A leper came to Jesus begging him, and kneeling he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” When this outcast leper fell down before Jesus and begged him for healing, he was recognizing that Jesus was God with us. He also wisely recognized that it was Jesus’ choice whether or not to heal him. Like the Psalmist, the leper knew that the ultimate source of power in his life was God and he surrendered to it. This leper came to Jesus just as he was, and gave it all to the ultimate source of power.

How did Jesus respond? The text tells us that he was, “moved with pity.” The Greek verb here could also be translated, “moved with anger,” or having one’s intestines turn. What Jesus felt about this leper’s plight and plea was gut wrenching. This man had a skin disease that made him untouchable to everyone in that day. Almost all skin diseases then were called leprosy. Not only could he not experience a comforting hug, no one would have anything to do with him. Ever been treated like a leper? How does it feel? The leper was like someone who has AIDS today. Here was this child of God pitifully crying out for help and no one came to aid him. Maybe all this background is the reason for Jesus feeling gut wrenching anger or pity and responding as he did.

Without hesitation, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the leper and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” –And, he was made clean!! I wonder if the words of

the Psalmist rang through this now healed man's mind, "To you, O LORD, I cried, and to the LORD I made supplication: You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever." (Ps. 30: 8, 11-12). Oh, praise God, this man, his life and spirit were transformed by the healing touch of Jesus, God with us; God with that man.

Next, Jesus told the man to be quiet about what happened and go have the healing verified by the temple priest as was required by religious law. If the temple priest certified the healing, the man could be accepted into society again, a leper no more! Of course the man was not quiet and went and told everyone, maybe even the priest.

But why did Jesus tell the now healed and transformed man to be quiet? A fantastic miracle had occurred. It was further evidence that Jesus was God on earth, the promised Messiah! Our best guess is that Jesus did not want more attention drawn to himself for fear that he might just be known as a healer of physical ailments. He was much more than this. There are those of you in our congregation who understand this because you have been healed of some tough illnesses or injuries and you do not want attention drawn to you over the healing. But I have seen how your lives have been transformed for Christ's greater mission. Jesus was on such a greater mission to give his body and his blood to heal us all of the worst diseases, sin and eternal death; and to transform us from captives of evil into people liberated to be a part of God's eternal kingdom. Now, about this transforming healing from evil and eternal death, he would not want us to be quiet.

The Apostle Paul was not quiet at all about the transforming healing God in Jesus Christ had gifted upon his life. Jesus had healed him of his sin and liberated him to be part of God's eternal kingdom. Paul saw the healing that transforms as an ongoing event, like an unending track meet with everlasting life through Jesus Christ as the imperishable prize. Track meets were a big deal to the people of Corinth. Only eight miles from the City of Corinth international track events were held in a stadium. They were able to identify with a wreath being given to the winner of a long race. The winner of the race would be transformed into a hero by the people. But that wreath would eventually die and decay. The memory of the winning runner would fade away. However, the wreath from God in Jesus Christ is everlasting, and the memory of those of us who have been healed of our sin and liberated to run the race for God's kingdom will never fade from God's memory.

The Apostle Paul also understood another aspect of the healing transformation that applies to those of us who still await physical healing even though we know the transformational healing from our sins and death in Jesus Christ. In a passage outside of today's Epistle Lesson, II Corinthians 12: 7-9 specifically, we learn that Paul had an unnamed thorn in the flesh that afflicted his body. Three times he asked Jesus to take it from him, but the Lord told him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." Paul's response was like the psalmist's, "So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." This aspect of healing that transforms is to know that Christ's grace is sufficient for us because his power is made perfect in our weakness. He is always there to help us,

sustain us and comfort us despite the burden we may carry. I know all of this to be true for I have two incurable physical problems inside me that could turn cancerous in an instant and with one of them I would have only a 2% chance of survival. Modern medicines help, but anxiety about it all could devastate me. However, through the grace and power of Christ, I have been healed from the anxiety about myself, and transformed to focus on serving others. I know there are others among us, with an ailment or two living in you, who have been healed of such anxiety in the same manner so that you have been transformed and set free to serve others in Christ's name.

Whether we have been physically healed or not, to keep us in touch with the ultimate source of power and to nurture the healing transformation God has led us through, it takes discipline to sustain our faith in the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Paul says we cannot be running about in life without direction or just be air boxing or foolishly striking out at nothing. He says it takes a focused discipline, even a painful one like going through physical therapy. It takes the disciplines of prayer, of reading the scriptures, of coming to worship, of reaching out to help others in Christ's name, of being kind, compassionate, loving, forgiving, yet truthful and of not giving up, but counting on the grace of God to keep us going. This discipline also includes being wise enough to take our medicines as prescribed. All of this keeps us in touch with the ultimate source of power, and nurtures the healing transformation God leads us through to sustain our faith in the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Today, through the experiences of the psalmist, the leper healed by Jesus, the testimony of the race running Apostle Paul who calls us to be disciplined in our faith in Jesus Christ, I hope we have gained a greater understanding of and dependence upon God's ultimate power to transform us by healing us in some manner in good times and bad because in all of life and even in death, we belong to him. Praise God!