

## **How to Have a Healing Presence**

### **Mark 1:40-45**

This last year the pastor of one of the largest churches in the US decided it was time to start taking better care of himself. Rick Warren, author of “The Purpose Driven Life”, consulted a doctor named Dr. Daniel Amen to help him. The results were impressive. Pastor Rick lost 60 pounds. Sounds great, right? The problem is that no matter what you’ve done right, someone always has to find fault.

Reporter Steve McConkey of the Christian Investigator, criticized Dr. Amen for what he called “unbiblical values.” Now I doubt this had anything to do with the program he designed for Rick Warren, but apparently Dr. Amen advocates meditation as a way of dealing with stress and high blood pressure.

Dr. Amen doesn’t ask his patients to do anything of a particularly religious nature when meditating. Just repeat certain syllables while you put your fingers together.

Well, McConkey didn’t consider that Kosher. He said that the Bible says we should only meditate on scripture. Meditating on anything else must be some kind of apostasy for McConkey. The Bible talks about meditating on the laws of Moses. It doesn’t say we have to, or that we can’t meditate on anything else.

Personally I’ve meditated on many things. I’ve meditated on the sound of music that I’m trying to perform because it helps me play it better. I encourage the coaches on the Brewers to have their players meditate on images of the ball flying out of the park, off of their bats, of course. They’re going to need all the help they can get this year without Fielder and Braun.

What’s missed in all of this bickering over who helps you lose weight and how is the fact that Pastor Warren lost 60 pounds. Does anyone know just how hard that is to do, with or without meditation? It’s an incredible accomplishment, one I hope to eclipse some day.

Pastor Warren responded to this criticism by basically marketing what he described as a “biblical” weight loss program. Here I am a lifelong reader of the Bible and I’ve never heard of such a thing.

It’s patterned after a story in the book of Daniel where Daniel is living as a captive of the Babylonians. Daniel proves to his captors that the God of Israel is the only real God by telling them that he only wants to be fed vegetables and water. Meanwhile his Babylonian counterparts dine on meat.

One would expect that Daniel would become as gaunt as a supermodel as a result of that kind of diet. Instead, the opposite happens. Miraculously, Daniel fills out even more than his meat eating counterparts.

So I thought it was kind of ironic that the diet which was supposed to make Daniel fill out is the inspiration for a diet that is supposed to make people lose weight.

Again, we can quibble about those kinds of details. But you can't quibble with the results. The folks at Saddleback church have lost a collective 250,000 lbs. Isn't that what really matters? The most important thing for a church that's trying to focus on personal wellness is...personal wellness.

This morning I want to talk about how we can create an environment of healing in the church. Many people may question whether or not this is really a "spiritual" matter.

But if you read Mark's gospel, you see a picture of Jesus who constantly goes around healing sick people and trying to create a healthier environment. He does so because he envisions wellness as an important sign that God's reign has come upon the earth.

In Mark chapter one Jesus begins his ministry, and most of it has to do with healing the sick. The passage we're looking at for today describes an encounter between Jesus and a man who suffers from leprosy.

The modern name for leprosy is Hansen's disease. It is very curable today. It is not as contagious as people thought it was during Jesus' time.

Also keep in mind that Hansen's disease was not the only thing referred to as leprosy in the Bible. There were any number of skin rashes and exemas that were called leprosy.

People couldn't distinguish between them back then the way we can now. And if you were diagnosed with something remotely resembling Hansen's disease, you were really in trouble.

According to the law that God gave to Moses, people who had this disease were required to remove themselves from the community because they were considered unclean before God. If they stayed in circulation with everyone else, they would make everyone else unclean.

You had to leave your job, leave your family, leave everything and isolate yourself from society. I want you to think of just how hard that has to be, and what it might feel like to be stigmatized like that.

In this story, Jesus unknowingly comes near a man with leprosy. By law, that man is supposed to notify Jesus that he is unclean and tell Jesus to keep his distance. Instead, this man does the exact opposite: he walks right up to Jesus and asks to be healed.

Now at this point Jesus, who is considered a Rabbi and a righteous man, should have told this man to scram. If he got any closer to Jesus, Jesus himself might have become unclean and need to be removed from society for a while.

Ironically, Jesus himself does the exact opposite: he reaches out and touches the man and heals him. Now this doesn't appear to most people to create a problem. Great. Jesus healed someone. Fantastic. But the act of healing creates a religious problem for people.

If Jesus touched this man, Jesus instantly becomes unclean. And God wouldn't have anything to do with someone who is unclean. But God does in fact heal this man through the very act which people thought would make God turn up God's nose. So, how is this possible? How can God heal someone while they're simultaneously breaking God's own laws? It doesn't add up.

Jesus knows this is the case, and he decides to turn the knife a little bit more. He tells the man to keep his mouth shut about the whole thing. Instead, as the law of Moses prescribes, he is supposed to go home, get an animal to sacrifice to God, and show up at the temple so he can be examined by the priest and declared clean again.

Of course, the minute this guy tells the priest that Jesus touched him and healed him, the priest is going to be at a loss to explain how that could have happened, given what I've just told you. It doesn't matter anyway.

The guy does the exact opposite of what Jesus tells him. He goes around town announcing to everyone who would listen that Jesus touched him and healed him from leprosy. Thanks for keeping it on the down-low, buddy.

When word got around that Jesus could do this, everyone in town who had one kind of problem or another came to Jesus asking to be healed. He was so mobbed that he had to sneak out of town and hang out in the boondocks to get any privacy. People eventually found out where he was and came out there to hound him.

All of this commotion pointed to a shift in the way God dealt with sickness. The concepts of clean and unclean were being dismantled, while God was seen as directly healing people, regardless of their status.

The result was a healthier environment where everyone had equal access to God's power. That was the kind of kingdom Jesus came to establish on earth.

Now there are a lot of lessons to be learned from this story. But the one I want to focus on is the way in which Jesus acted as a healing presence to the people all around him. This story has a lot to teach us about that. Let me point out some specific things.

First, part of the reason why Jesus was able to heal people and create an environment of healing in places like this is because Jesus was willing to be present with people who would otherwise be abandoned by society.

Jesus' decision to physically touch this man would have been shocking to people in his world. In the same way, we still tend to distance ourselves from people who are ill, whether they're contagious or not.

We tend to blame people for their illnesses. In fact, there are a lot of people who see illness as a personal failure on someone's part. Many of you can remember the days when people who were diagnosed with diseases like polio or TB were physically hauled out of their homes and housed in

sanatoriums, away from family and friends, who, as we know these days, often play a crucial role in the healing process.

We don't do things like that anymore, but we still have a hard time being present with people who are ill. One of the things that people who suffer a serious illness notice is that their friends often become a lot more scarce, at the very time when they need their friends the most.

One experience that taught me the importance of someone's presence in the process of healing was while I was a resident hospital chaplain. Part of the residency process involves going around the hospital visiting patients with the chaplain supervisor, who was a real expert in hospital chaplaincy.

My supervisor was this incredible minister named Ben who had a real positive influence on me when I was just getting out of seminary.

Ben and I went into a room where a sick young woman was being treated for some disease. When we walked in, her husband was actually laying in bed with her, trying to comfort her.

They saw us and we introduced ourselves as the chaplains. When they heard who we were, the husband jumped out of the bed as if he had been doing something wrong. Ben said, "No, don't get up. Stay in bed with her. I think it's just fine for you to be with her like that."

Now I had never even thought about that before. Having him present was important to her healing process, just like Jesus touching this isolated man was crucial to his healing process.

Now I'm not advocating that you start jumping into people's hospital beds as part of our church's ministry. But I do think we all need to take seriously the need to be present with people who are sick or hurting.

Back in the day we used to have senior luncheons once a month. Renoel Sanders would love to have attended some of them, but he was unable to leave his wife, who was lying in bed sick for so many years.

So one time we decided that instead of having a potluck lunch at the church, we would all drive out and converge upon Renoel's house. We told him we were coming, of course.

But I can't tell you what kind of a difference that made for him. I had visited him dozens of times, and he was so alone. His house was always so quiet. But that day it was full of life. And that did Renoel more good than anything else we could have done for him.

Another time, not too long ago, Phyllis told us that she wasn't going to be driving anymore. She was giving up her keys. Well, that meant she wasn't going to be able to attend Tuesday Bible studies anymore.

So we all got together and decided we would, for the first time, take Bible study on the road. We all piled in Ken Jones' van and headed out to Phyllis' place.

I don't remember what passage we studied or who was on the prayer list. All I know was that our presence with Phyllis at a time when she was unable to get out was very powerful and very healing. It was a way of bringing God's kingdom to life for her.

Secondly, Jesus is said to have been moved by compassion when he saw this poor guy. Some people might rightly wonder whether or not it really mattered how Jesus felt about the situation. Isn't what Jesus did more important than what he felt?

Well of course it is. The point is that Jesus healed this man, not that he felt sorry for him. So why does Mark bother to point his detail out? Couldn't he have just said, "Yeah, Jesus healed the guy. The disease went away and the guy was free to live his life."

You see, Mark's trying to tell us something important about God's own person, God's own being through this story. People generally didn't think of God as having compassion on people. God wasn't thought to empathize with people's hurts. God was either happy with you for being good or angry with you for being bad.

And, of course, if you're sick, as this man was, then people figured it's your fault for doing something really bad. People thought this man had leprosy as punishment from God for some evil deed that either he or someone in his family did.

When Mark tells us that Jesus felt sorry for him, felt compassion for him, he's giving us a completely different image of God, one that is still lost on a lot of people today. If Jesus, as God's son, feels compassion for the guy, it means that this man is not actually at fault for being sick.

That would have come as a shock to people who generally understood illness in those terms. These days we still tend to blame people for their illnesses. We can all think of poor health choices that we have made which contribute to many of the problems we face.

When we look at someone who is sick our tendency is to say to ourselves, "Boy, this person should have done this or shouldn't have done that/ Now look at what they've done to themselves!"

Jesus, on the other hand, looks at this man with compassion, regardless of how the man came to be ill. Compassion for those who are suffering is crucial to the kingdom of God.

It means that if Jesus has compassion for people, then God has compassion for all of us. It grieves God's heart to see us suffer, regardless of how we came to suffer. And if that's so, then those who are Jesus' followers should also act primarily out of compassion to those who are suffering.

Compassion was more important than following some arcane set of rules, even if those rules were considered the pinnacle of godliness in the past. Compassion is more important than figuring out who's at fault. The object of the game is not punishing the wicked as much as it is healing those who have been battered by the conditions of this world.

One of the greatest religious writers in the US, a presbyterian named Fredrich Beuchner, tells a story about a time when he was invited to teach at a seminar in San Francisco with Maya Angelou.

Maya Angelou is a celebrated poet who worked with Dr. King in the civil rights movement and was invited to recite some of her poetry at previous presidential inaugurations.

Beuchner said, "There we were to do these lectures together in San Francisco. We were both there to tell our stories one way or the other. I told some of my story in the first lecture and the same man who introduced me got up to introduce Maya Angelou.

He talked about who she was and how she grew up in the little town of Stamps, Arkansas, in the 1930's, the height of racism, segregation, dire poverty, in continual fear of their lives in many ways. After he introduced her that way he said, "She will now tell you her story and you will find it is a very different story from the one you have just heard from Frederick Buechner".

As he said, "She is going to tell a very different story from the one you have just heard from Frederick Buechner," I could see Maya Angelou sitting in the front row shaking her head back and forth.

When she got up in front of the microphone, the first thing she said was, "No, he is wrong. My story is not a very different story from Frederick Buechner's. It is the same story."

Beuchner says, "I found this terribly moving because in every obvious way you could hardly imagine two stories that were more different. She a woman; I a man. She black, I white. She growing up in direst poverty; I, by comparison, growing up in the lap of luxury."

Yet, she was right. We all do have the same story at a certain level, that is, when it comes to the business of how are we going to be human beings in this world. How are we going to believe in a just and loving God in a world which gives us so many reasons every day for not believing in a blasted thing?"

How are we going to survive what happens to us, especially very often the sad things that happen to us as children? At that level indeed, we all do have the same story. That was the opening of this moment of grace to me, those words she spoke."

I want to challenge you to offer that same grace to those you meet who are hurting. Their story is our story. We share some of the same hurts. We need someone to reach out and empathize with us, just as they do.

But we also see Jesus as our example of healing, compassionate empathy. That is what his kingdom is about. Those things are neither weak, nor impotent. They are more powerful in many cases than overwhelming force.

But most of all, they are reflections of God's own character. As this man said to Jesus, "If you wish, you can heal me." Jesus said, "I do wish" May we also wish for the same thing this week.