

Windows to the World: Christ the Healer

Luke 17:11-19

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This morning we are focusing on the Stewart window – you can see this window if you look back and to your left (it is also on the cover of your bulletin).

This window was given as a memorial to Mr. Ivey Withers Stewart and Mrs. Lillian Wallace Stewart by their children. The Stewarts were what you would call “engaged” in the life of faith and the life of the church. They also knew that the ministry of First Presbyterian Church extended beyond this place and into our city, our state, and our denomination. Between them, Mr. and Mrs. Stewart served as leaders with the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Foundation, Presbyterian Hospital, Alexander Children’s Home, Queens College, Davidson College, and the Charlotte YMCA.

The theme of this window is “Christ the Healer” – an acknowledgement of Mr. Stewart’s work with Presbyterian Hospital and Mrs. Stewart’s work with children who lived at the Alexander Children’s Home.

There are a lot of stories from the gospels about Jesus’ healing. Today I am reading an account of Jesus healing ten lepers from the gospel of Luke. You can follow along in your pew Bibles on page 80.

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On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.

As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him.

Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’

When he saw them, he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went, they were made clean.

Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.

And he was a Samaritan.

Then Jesus asked, ‘Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?’

Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

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In many ways, Ivey and Lillian Stewart are models of what it means to follow Jesus – because when you follow Jesus you are, by definition, in the business of healing.

As a church, healing is a central component of our mission – and that healing takes many forms.

We are called to be about the healing of the body –
through medical mission trips – like the one our church will soon take to Haiti, or
providing space for Alcoholics Anonymous, or
supporting our missionaries, Larry and Inge Sthreshley, whose ministry is committed to improving the public health of our sisters and brothers in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

We are called to be agents of reconciliation –
bridging the divide between individuals or groups in conflict,
providing space to talk about long-standing hurts,
confronting discrimination in order that growth might occur.

We are called to be about the healing of the spirit –
through an active ministry of prayer that lifts up specific people and specific situations to the throne of God,
and the presence of Stephen Ministers who are trained members of this congregation that come along side people in times of crisis and need.

To be a disciple of Jesus and to be a member of the Church of Jesus Christ means that you take an active interest – if not role – in the healing of the world and our neighbors and in one another.

But the truth is, when it comes to healing, we're not really quite sure how it works. It would be nice if there were a formula, right? And if that formula worked on a consistent basis. But think about the stories of Jesus' healing. There's not a pattern there, either.

Sometimes Jesus heals people by laying his hands on them.
Other times Jesus heals when people lay their hands on him.
Sometimes Jesus heals people by giving them a remedy – “go, wash in the pool of Siloam.”¹
Other times Jesus just speaks – as in today's passage – and healing occurs.

¹ John 9

In today's Scripture Jesus effects healing without laying a finger on the lepers who asked for help. Yet the healing began because Jesus did something that everybody else failed to: he saw the people who were in need.

In fact, the Bible almost assures that people with leprosy would be out of sight – out of notice. The book of Leviticus – chapter 13 verses 45-46 states: “one who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his lip and cry ‘unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp.”

Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor notes that in Jesus' time, leprosy was not thought to be a punishment for sin. Rather, it was understood to be an inexplicable act of God, which made it even more frightening. “Lepers,” Taylor writes, “were shunned – because their disease was contagious, certainly, but it was more than that. It was their pain, their loneliness, their inexplicable fear no one wanted to catch, and so they were kept at a distance.”² Ignored.

As he came to the outer limit of their town...a place out of the way, where they could avoid the rest of the townspeople...ten lepers approached Jesus. “Unclean, unclean” they said. “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

And Jesus saw them. And they were made clean.

Sometimes that is the way the church can participate in Christ's healing ministry, too. To see those who are so often ignored. To see them as people – and not diseases, or conditions, or orientations, or problems. Sometimes just being seen brings healing.

Jesus sees the ten lepers and they are healed. And then Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priest (because the priest is the only one who can pronounce them clean and fit to come back into the community). Nine of the lepers go. One of the lepers turns back – and he was a Samaritan...someone who was a double outsider – unclean from his leprosy and without a place in the Jewish society as a Samaritan.

This lone leper turns back and praises God and thanks Jesus for the gift of his healing. And in light of his gratitude, Jesus tells him “your faith has made you well.” Or, if you want to translate it a different way, “your faith has saved you.” You see, there is healing and then there is salvation. They are related – but the difference is gratitude.

New Testament scholar David Bartlett says that this story of the ten lepers is really an account of two healings: from leprosy and, even more important, from

² Taylor, Barbara Brown, *The Preaching Life* (p. 108).

ingratitude, which Dr. Bartlett calls a life-threatening, spirit-threatening, well-being threatening sin.

When we follow Jesus we are about the business of healing – and just as important – when we follow Jesus we are about the business of gratitude.

And I'm not talking about expecting the people we help, or the church helps, to say "thank-you" for what we have done. I'm talking about embodying a spirit of gratitude as we are going about the business of healing.

Healing without a spirit of gratitude looks like works-righteousness. If people don't know why we seek to heal, then they might wonder if it is because of what we expect to get out of it.

And if there is success, healing without a spirit of gratitude can tempt us to believe that any healing was our work – instead of God working through us.

They are connected – healing and gratitude. Bound together. Each as important as the other. Yet, I believe, in our go, go, go culture – where we place so much value on individual achievement...where we conflate our worth as a person with our ability to succeed...the place where we need the most help is not around finding ways to effect healing, but instead, in practicing gratitude.

I recently read about a time the National Press Club invited the Reverend Fred Rogers (of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood fame) to one of its much publicized luncheons. The events are famous for bringing together top diplomats, government officials, leaders in business and industry, sometimes heads of state, and the press, of course. When Mr. Rogers was the speaker, attendees joked ahead of time that it was going to be a "light lunch."

Mr. Rogers began by taking out his pocket watch and announcing that he wanted to start his speech with two minutes of silence during which he invited each person present to "remember people in their past—parents, teachers, coaches, friends, and others—who had made it possible for them to accomplish so much" and to be where they were today. . . . The room grew quiet as the seconds ticked away. A reporter said that one could hear all around the room people sniffing as they were moved by the memories of those who had made sacrifices on their behalf and who had given them many gifts."³

It's one thing to participate with God in the healing of the world or of our neighbors. It brings satisfaction. We can send money, or supplies...we can volunteer...we can do something. But healing without a deep appreciation of what motivates our action might do some good, but it will not make us well. The tenth leper knew that.

³ Long, Thomas, *Testimony*, p. 110

I want to close this sermon by telling a story – maybe it’s more like a parable – that one of my heroes of preaching, Fred Craddock, told from time to time. For many years, Dr. Craddock taught preaching at Emory University in Atlanta. He travelled all around the country speaking and preaching. On one trip, he travelled to a conference to speak and stayed over on a Saturday night which led him to search for a place to go to church on Sunday morning. I’ll pick up the story using his words:

“I took my seat, a bit early, but it soon began to fill up and soon was totally filled. It would say there were about 120 people. At the appointed hour, the choir came down. Following the choir came the minister, in this case, a man.

I was absolutely shocked. He was very tall – and also very large, maybe 280 or 300 pounds. But the most noticeable feature was his stumbling, lumbering gait. He was awkward, almost falling, with his long useless arms at his sides, like they were awaiting further instruction. His head was misshapen, his hair was askew. He stumbled up the three or four steps to get to the pulpit. When he turned to face us, I saw the thick glasses, and through them I could see the milky film over his eyes, one of his eyes was going out, nothing coming in to the other. When he read, he held the book near his nose. When he spoke, the sinews of his neck worked with such vigor as he pushed out the words, it was as if he had learned to speak as an adult. But I lost all consciousness of that after a while. He read 1 Corinthians 13 and preached on the subject in the bulletin, “But the greatest of these is love.” It was an unusual thing. If you had a copy of his sermon, you would say, I’d give it a grade of “C.” It was not poetic, it was not prophetic, it was pastoral. It was so warm and so full of love and affection. It was firm, and it had exhortation in it. But the relationship between those people, the love that he extended as he preached, and the love that came back from those people who sat quietly, leaning forward, was captivating, and I was captured.

I wanted to get acquainted with this extraordinary preacher, so I lingered at the door hoping to invite him to lunch. He couldn’t go, but as I stood at the door and observed the greetings and hellos and little words of pastoral care, comfort, and respect between him and the members, one woman I would guess to be seventy shook his hand at the door. She spoke with him and said this: “I wish I could have known your mother.” I saw her having the same trouble as I was. She didn’t understand the source of this pastor’s beauty and thought maybe, *I wish I knew your mother*. He said, “My mother’s name is Grace.”

When everyone had left and I began to visit with him, we sat on the back pew for a few minutes, and I said, “That was an unusual response you gave to that woman, “My mother’s name is Grace.”

And he said, “It is? When I was born,” he said, “I was put up for adoption at the Department of Family Services. But as you can see, nobody wanted to adopt me. So I went from foster home to foster home, and when I was about sixteen or seventeen,

I saw some young people going into a church. I wanted to be with young people, so I went in, and there I met grace – the grace of God.”