

God first started teaching me about healing when I was in my first appointment at Warwick Memorial United Methodist Church in Newport News, Virginia. Before I entered full-time ministry, I interviewed at seven churches for an associate pastor position.

During my last semester of seminary, I drove from church to church to have these interviews. Each church had their own strengths, but I fell in love with one church in Winchester, Virginia. I loved the beautiful location and the senior pastor lived and breathed the liturgy. I was hoping to get to work there. There was another church that I knew would be a lot of work, and I prayed a “let this cup pass from me” prayer to God about being appointed to that church.

When I went for my interview the leadership team walked me into their beautiful new facility and said if I came it would be my job to start a new contemporary service and fill up that space. Wouldn't you know that is the church to which I was appointed?

Inherently there was nothing wrong with this church. The leadership and congregation were wonderful, but I did not want to take on a new worship service in my first year of ministry. The reason I approached this new task with fear and trepidation is that this service had failed seven times before I got there. Seven. I kept thinking that we were up against insurmountable odds. Whatever we did had to be different from the seven times before.

If I am honest my fear stemmed from the fear of failure. I was worried that my lack of experience would cause this new service to fail. Also, I was afraid of the unknown. How was I even supposed to start this mighty task? Through God's grace and the support of this beloved community we started the service called “The Lampstand” that is now the largest service of that church.

It was a success, but in the process of this huge endeavor I lost my health. Six months into the service I got mono and had to take a three week leave of absence to recover. Admittedly this happened because I was not taking care of myself. I was pushing too hard and I was not asking for help. This was the first time in my life that I was so sick I could not do the things I wanted to do. It taught me that I must take care of my body.

I learned that self-care is not something you do because you are supposed to, it is something we do because we are commanded to. In fact, taking care of ourselves is a holy practice and it was modeled to us by God. In Genesis 2 we see that after God created everything, God rested on the seventh day. So, if even God rested on the seventh day then shouldn't we?

In 1 Corinthians 6, the Apostle Paul reminds us that our “bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own...” In this Scripture the Apostle Paul reminds us that we must take care of our bodies because our bodies are the vessels that God uses to allow us to be ministry to other people. To participate in the healing ministry of Jesus we first must take care of ourselves.

Over the years it has become culturally acceptable to become as theologian Stanley Hauerwas puts it: “A quivering mass of availability.”ⁱ In other words, we are unable to sit still, and this has become the norm. Look around at a doctor's office the next time you go. To pass the time waiting most people are doing something on their phones or tablets.

In Scripture God calls us to stillness for us to experience God moving in our lives. In Psalm 46:10-11 God tells us: “Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.’ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” God is always calling us to serve but are we able to faithfully hear the voice of God when we feel weighed down by our obligations?

It is the weight of responsibility in our lives that so often keeps us from being able to see how God continues to be active in the world today. For the next six weeks I want to call us to a time of rest and healing.

Today we start our six-week sermon series on “The Healing Stories of Jesus.” I felt led to choose this topic because I believe especially in this season of our lives, we are all in need of Christ's healing.

It has been a tough year for all of us. With the pandemic, the death of nine members of our charge, and the stress of the world, we are all in need of God's healing. As we read through these six accounts of Christ's healing may we also remember that God is still offering us healing each day.

In his book, “The Healing Stories of Jesus: Signs of the New Creation” Louis Grams shares: “The announcement of the arrival of the kingdom of God is tied to the manifestations of healing and deliverance.”ⁱⁱ

In the Gospel of Luke, we see that before Jesus called the disciples, he was already practicing healing.ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus’ ministry began in Luke 3 when he was baptized by John, then immediately he went into the wilderness for 40 days. When he emerged unscathed from the wilderness he went to his hometown of Nazareth, but his ministry was rejected there, and the people almost drove him off a cliff.

So, he decided to go to Capernaum. Our Scripture from Luke 4 shares about the second healing miracle of Jesus Christ. When we hear this story of Jesus healing Peter’s mother-in-law from a fever, at first, we may think that it pales in comparison to the other healings and miracles that are coming.

We may think, “Jesus healed her of a fever big deal.” However, it was in fact a very big deal. We know that a fever is usually indicative of something that is to come. I wonder what would have happened to her if Jesus had not arrived at that moment.

What I appreciate about this Scripture is that her community alerted Jesus to the fact that she was ill. At some level they had to believe that Jesus could offer her some healing. Therefore, it is important for us to stay connected as the community of faith, so that we can continue to care for one another.

Jesus immediately responded to this request and “rebuked” the fever and then she was healed.^{iv} What is beautiful about this Scripture is her response to Christ’s healing. The moment after she was healed, she got up and began serving Christ. This is our response to Christ’s healing ministry in the world, that we continue to serve Christ.

It is important to note that we can continue to serve Christ even when we are experiencing sickness and disease. Throughout my ministry, I have seen many become disheartened as they find themselves unable to serve in the ways that they used to due to an illness or a change in their situation in life. I understand these feelings of despair, but I always want to remind people that we always have an opportunity to serve where we are.

Especially during this pandemic, we are all learning to serve in a different way. Just as the community cared for Peter’s mother-in-law, we are called to continue to care for one another today and always. This means we should continue to check on one another and reach out to see if there are any needs in our church or community. When we can connect to one another we can also share about how we are experiencing Christ’s healing ministry in the world.

I wonder how you have experienced Christ’s healing in your life. Have you ever been healed by Christ or witnessed the healing of a loved one? Perhaps you have not experienced this phenomenon, but long to see Christ’s healing work in the world today.

I am here to remind you today that Christ is still offering us healing. So often when we talk about Christ’s healing, we talk about it as a future reality; like it is something that we hope for when Christ returns. Yet, the Bible tells us that the kingdom of God is not a future reality, but a present reality.

In Luke 17:20-21 Jesus says: “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.”

We can participate in the kingdom of God arriving today when we take part in Christ’s healing ministry in the world. On that day so many years ago the community of faith responded to Christ’s healing of Peter’s mother-in-law by telling everyone they knew.

The next thing Jesus knew there was a crowd of people who needed healing that were brought to Jesus. And Jesus took the time to lay hands on each person, then they experienced God’s healing.

This past week I was blessed to lay my hands upon a woman who was dying. Before I did, I explained to the family that we lay hands on those in need of healing because this is what Christ call us to do. As pastors when we lay hands on those who are sick or dying, we do it in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are not the agent of healing, but God working through us offers healing in this world or the world to come.

Being with people in this vulnerable state is sacred, it is holy. It takes my breath away because God meets us there. Although we may not always experience immediate healing like those in this Scripture, we still see evidence that Christ’s healing work continues in the world today. We are called to be agents of healing for the glory of God.

You can take part in the healing ministry of Jesus by offering to pray for your family and friends. Prayer is powerful and this is why we do joys and concerns each week as well as have our prayer chain. We are called to take part in the healing ministry of Jesus Christ by practicing renewal.

When we take time to rest and heal, God grants us energy to continue to do the work of the Lord. Just as I had to learn the hard way to take a real sabbath, God continues to call us to rest in the Spirit.

In the Gospels we see that Jesus often went to be by himself to rest and recharge. He even gave his disciples this advice in Mark 6:31-32: “He said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.”

Jesus knew that the disciples would do better ministry if they rested. So, the question before us today is when is the last time you really rested for the entire day? I know that resting can mean different things for different people. By resting I mean when is the last time you took an entire day for renewal to do something life-giving?

I try and take each Friday as my sabbath. I try to spend that day doing things that bring me closer to God and my family. Just as the Israelites practiced the Sabbath each week and kept it holy, we too are called to rest in God. This is how we also participate in God’s healing in our lives.

For myself, in that first year of ministry I realized that God’s healing was available to me if only I would rest and receive it. My prayer is that you too would experience Christ’s healing as you rest in Him.

This week I want you to plan one day to rest in the Lord. You can spend that day in prayer or with a loved one but be intentional about taking some time for rest. On this day spend time thinking about how you have experienced Christ’s healing and how you see Christ’s ministry alive in the world today. Finally, pray and ask God how you are being called to participate in Christ’s ministry of healing.

The good news for our lives is that Christ continues to invite us into this important ministry of healing. I pray we will respond and live into the kingdom of God alive in the world today. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ William Willimon. “Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2002. P. 60.

ⁱⁱ Louis Grams. “The Healing Stories of Jesus: Signs of the New Creation.” The Word Among Us Press. 2016. P. 9.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leander Keck et al. “The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary.” Vol VIII. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2015. P. 89.

^{iv} Luke 4:39. NRSV.