

*Lord, open our ears to hear your Word spoken to us;
Open our hearts to be changed by Your Spirit. Amen.*

There is no story in our gospel today – more of connective tissue between stories. What comes before this is the sad tale of how John the Baptist was beheaded – (we’re skipping that one, thank you very much), and what happens after is the feeding of the 5,000, which we’ll hear about in two weeks.

We’re left with a few words about Jesus’ disciples coming back excited after their first mission foray, and him trying to take them away for a little retreat, and not quite making it because the crowds keep finding them.

Those crowds are desperate for understanding, for connection and for healing. In fact, so desperate are they for healing, they run around the lake Jesus is crossing to meet him on the other side; and they start bringing their sick and laying them in marketplaces so they might touch even the fringe of his cloak.

Remember our story two weeks ago, about the woman with the hemorrhage who crept through the crowd to touch the hem of his robe and received healing? Word must have gotten out!

“Hey, you don’t even need to bother him, just touch his clothes...”

Healing is integral to the Christian enterprise. It is what Jesus did, all the time. It’s what Jesus commanded his disciples to do:

Go out, proclaim the Gospel and heal the sick. Always together – proclaim the Gospel and heal the sick – because they go together.

And that’s what his disciples did, once they realized the power was in them too. That’s what Paul did – it’s the main way Paul built his churches – by teaching about Jesus and demonstrating the power of God’s kingdom through healing. So why aren’t we doing more of it?

I confess it baffles me, for churches are always asking how we might connect with more people, and yet we leave our most powerful gift out of the invitation.

Healing prayer is to be our first response to a crisis in health.

When my friend Linda was diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer, I asked if we could gather a group to pray with her once or twice a week – it’s called soaking prayer. She and her husband were open to it.

So a group would gather regularly, whoever was available.
We didn't stay long – just prayed and left and came back again.
There was something about the repetition over the long haul that had power.
Her cancer went into remission, and though ultimately it came back, she lived an additional six years during which her husband went to seminary, she ran a highly successful sweater design firm and started a new vocation as a poet.

It was during that time that another friend was diagnosed with uterine fibroids, probably the affliction suffered by the women who reached out for Jesus' hem. Emboldened by all this prayer around me, I gathered a group to pray for her, praying that the tumors would shrivel up and leave her. On the day of her surgery, the doctors were stunned to find nothing there. There were definite masses on the xrays, but now nothing.

Healing prayer is not only effective on physical conditions –
I've prayed with a lot of people about emotional and mental illnesses.
I once had a parishioner who was chronically depressed and often suicidal. She had been an amazing doctor, but the medication she took messed with her memory, so she could no longer practice medicine;
now she just survived in a fog, and she often she cut herself – I put her hunting knife in my file cabinet to keep it out of her house.
But she was open to healing prayer, and we prayed frequently, and I saw change; and I got her into a small prayer group and connected her to more and more people in the parish, so that when the bottom fell out, as it did periodically, she'd be tethered to a loving community – and it worked.
Gradually she gained strength, started chalice-bearing, joined our church band. And even when a horrible tragedy befell her later, she did not go under.

Friends, this needs to be part of our ministry at the Christ Churches.
I want you each to start praying about it,
discerning whether or not you're called to exercise faith on behalf of others.
I'd like to see us have prayer teams at both churches each Sunday,
available to pray with anyone who wishes after church.
We could have Facebook groups in which healing prayer happens.
I will offer training, and we will have support.
We are about to launch a Prayer Tree, which will have a group of people who covenant to pray for any needs which are communicated to them.
That will be wonderful and important.

But here I'm talking about praying with, in person or by phone or online,
Inviting the healing flow of God's power and light to be released.
A group of us did it on Zoom before Andie's last surgery, and it was remarkable.

This gospel reading, short as it is, tells us that we don't need Jesus here
in human flesh in order for his healing power to go forth.
Because Jesus is here in us. The Spirit's power is here in us.
We are the fringe of his garment – we need to get out to the marketplaces and
places where people are hurting and offer that ministry of prayer and healing.
August 21 we'll participate once again in the Kent Avenue Block Party –
two years ago we had a table with information, and we also offered prayer
to any passersby – Danielle and I must have prayed with 25 people that day.
We could set up outside our churches on Saturdays with big signs,
“Want a prayer?” I bet you people will stop.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians that they were now *citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*

The church is not this lovely building or this weekly gathering.
We don't “go to church.” We ARE the church.
We are ever being built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God –
Wherever we invoke God's love and power in prayer and healing,
we are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.
Wherever we are agents for reconciliation and restoration,
we are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Wherever we allow ourselves to be the fringe of Jesus' cloak,
allowing his amazing power and love to flow through us to others,
we are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.
Let's not keep this power to ourselves.

Amen.

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 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. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Ephesians 2:11-22

Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision” —a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.