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“Contrast Society: From Woundedness to Joy”

Luke 5:17-26

If I am perfectly honest, I would have to say that our Biblical text this morning is not among my favorites. Actually, it doesn't make the top 75%. Usually I like stories about Jesus healing a person. However, in this story, before he heals a man who is paralyzed, Jesus declares out of the blue that this man's sins are forgiven. The man never asked for this pronouncement and we don't have a record saying that he did any confessing of sin. So why would Jesus take this tactic? The scribes and Pharisees didn't like it any more than I do, and they weren't certain that Jesus should speak for God on the topic of forgiveness. It seems that only to appease them, Jesus finally heals the man. Here's the story:

Read Luke 5:17-26.

As you can imagine, this story has a profound theological controversy about forgiveness at its center. The Jesus Seminar groups this healing story with the other nineteen separate stories in the gospels containing cures and resuscitations. They note that in some of these stories there is an accompanying pronouncement with the cure. This is the case with our text today – the physical cure of the paralytic so that he could walk, and the spiritual pronouncement that he was forgiven.

“The Acts of Jesus” Robert Funk & The Jesus Seminar, p.13

The healing stories in the Bible follow a pattern.

1. Introduction of the patient, often with a mention of the gravity or severity of their problem (our story does that... check)
2. Contact between the healer and the patient (check)
3. A healing word or the use of a healing technique (check)
4. And the climax of each story is when the patient demonstrates that a cure has in fact taken place (check)

Our healing story today follows the regular pattern. This story appears in both Mark and Luke. Mark wrote the first, and Luke adapted the original story. Luke adds an introduction and mentions that the Pharisees and teachers came from every village in Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. It was like a whole convention was being held in Capernaum.

If you want to know how the Jesus Seminar dealt with the passage, they believe that Jesus telling a lame man to pick up his mat and that Jesus cured a lame man were actual events in Jesus' ministry. However, the story in Luke, they thought, was an adaptation of history and they gave it a "probably not true" vote.

"Acts of Jesus" Robert Funk & the Jesus Seminar, p. 282.

As I mentioned, there is an additional part in this drama – Jesus' pronouncement of the forgiveness of sin. Scholars tend to believe that this aspect of the story was a later addition – an expansion of the original healing. The reason for this addition, we figure, is because the Christian community in later years had debates about who had the authority to forgive sins. Was it God, Jesus, the Christian community, the apostles... just who had that authority? To give clarity to this issue, the story was adapted.

At any rate, in this text, the forgiveness of sins was integrally related to the cure. Physical handicaps were regarded in those days as the consequence of sin and as divine punishment. That's why the lepers had to sit outside the city walls – not because they might be contagious, but because they were unclean and being punished for some wrong in their lives.

Perhaps Jesus himself, as a man of his time, didn't realize that sins and illness were not related. As far as the story goes, the cure cancels the consequences of sin. In other words, it really was the same pronouncement:

- Get up, pick up your mat, and go home, or
- Your sins are forgiven.

"Acts of Jesus" Robert Funk & The Jesus Seminar, p. 64.

Today we are continuing our series on “Jesus’ Vision for a Contrast Society”. Last week I explained that the teachings of Jesus are given as a direct reversal of whatever is the “norm”. Jesus often referred to the *Kingdom of God* when he spoke of these values. Because the word “kingdom” does not resonate with us, I suggested that we talk about the teachings of Jesus as a contrast society. Each week I will expand on a comparison of the values of humans and Jesus’ answer of an opposite value. Last week, we discussed fear turning to love. Today, I want to explore what it would look like to turn our woundedness into joy.

It’s easy to get hurt in life. Physically, emotionally, spiritually. We fall and break our leg, and though it heals, we still limp when we’re tired. Arthritis plagues our joints and causes an achy tiredness.

Someone’s words cut us deeply and we carry the poison around inside. We get hurt by family, friends, church people, strangers... they all have the power to wound us.

Unanswered prayers, disbelief, continued heartache ... we get frustrated spiritually and wonder where God is. Our wounds run deep. If we aren’t careful, the wounds of the world can pile up inside and cause us to become angry, bitter, or melancholy people.

And then, we can become a wounder. Too often, people in the church, instead of being gentle with one another...we actually are the wounders. What wounds do you carry with you in life? What is your deepest hurt? Is it time to turn those wounds into healing power?

Some time back, Henri Nouwen wrote a book called “The Wounded Healer”. In it, he notes the fundamental woundedness that comes with being human. Realizing that woundedness is common to both minister and believer, he says that woundedness can serve as a source of strength when we care for others. It is his contention that we are called to recognize the sufferings of their time in our own hearts and make that recognition the starting point of our service. For Nouwen,

ministers and others who offer care must be willing to go beyond the professional role and leave themselves open as fellow human beings with the same wounds and suffering -- in the image of Christ. In other words, we heal from our own wounds. He says, "In our own woundedness, we can become the sources of life for others."

When we come to Jesus with our wounds, he forgives us as he heals us. It is such a complete healing, that our very selves are changed. We stand up without our pain, and begin thanking God. Our woundedness turns to joy.

Allowing God to heal the wounded spots in our lives makes the difference between (as Joan Chittister writes), a happy life and a dull life, a holy life and an empty one. The way we do the little things in life is the mark of the bigness of our souls.

This is good news to a church like UCC! Because of our past wounds, we have the experience and the inner knowledge to turn wounds into joy and then to share it! She says that "It's when we go on despite the fact that quitting would be more satisfying that we know that God has taken control of our lives. Then, we are being used for something greater than ourselves."

"Called to Question" by Joan Chittister

Anyone who has been in a long-term relationship knows the truth of this-when we are hurt, or our power threatened, it's a natural response to fight back or to quit. But to do so indicates we are paralyzed by our wounds. When we pick up our mats,-our wounds healed- and go on our way rejoicing, that's when we participate in Jesus' vision of a contrast society. Let us be as the paralytic: healed from the wounds inside and brought to wholeness in body, mind and spirit. And let us also stand up, pick up the signs of our wounds, and go on our way rejoicing... for our woundedness has turned to joy!