

March 4, 2012

Matthew 14:34-36  
Luke 6:17-19  
Acts 3:1-10, 14:8-10  
John 14:11-14

## HEALING

About half this sermon will be preliminary remarks. We need to check our perspective if we are to have a meaningful conversation about “healing.” Very happily, a number of you make comments to me that are pertinent to our conversation. Every church has a “conversation” going on behind the scenes, in and around the worship and the relationships and the outer gatherings of the congregation.

Anyway, thanks for the comments and questions and disagreements that let me know you are listening, and that you care. I am increasingly grateful for *The New Church*. I have to watch myself, more and more, that I don’t start feeling sorry for people who are not part of it.

We are into three conversations with each other at the moment, any one of which would cause mayhem, if not warfare, in most normal churches. There are numerous subtopics under each of the three conversations we are having, but just to name the major categories:

1.) We are talking about superstition versus faith. Or for some of you: miracles versus magic.

2.) We are talking about a Jesus who does not fit the usual assumptions of our culture. This brings us to fresh considerations about love, salvation/reconciliation, the meaning of the Cross, the purpose of the church, and how Christians are trying to live. It does because if Jesus is not who most people assume or is not like what most people assume, then following Jesus starts looking very different as well.

3.) We are claiming more and more clearly that our authority is the Holy Spirit – *not* the outer structures or offices of any church, and *not* the outer print-on-paper Bible.

Back in the past, some people did accuse me of just wanting to cause trouble. That has never been true, actually. The truth is that there *is* trouble, and I am not the one who is causing it. Basing faith on false premises causes serious trouble and does serious damage. Others have sometimes wondered if I was trying to take away faith or weaken

belief. That is clearly untrue, as anyone who hangs around with me for very long realizes. I want all of us to believe and trust God with greater clarity, greater commitment and devotion, greater obedience and focus – all the time. Thousands of Christians believe a whole lot, and do very little about it. What that reveals is that the belief itself is not genuine. True belief – and even more, genuine TRUST – changes how we see everything, what we live for, what we care about. In short, it transforms us. That means if we want to be serious and genuine followers of Jesus, we must weed out those portions of our faith that got handed to us along the way that we have never truly owned or never really bought – those things to which we have never actually given our lives or our allegiance. Whatever else we may think or conclude about Jesus, He wasn't kidding around. People do not willingly go to a Cross for kicks. It is not something to do on a dare or to impress the neighbors. Following Jesus is serious business! So when seventy to eighty percent of the church members in our country claim the “New Life in Christ Jesus” without making a single significant change or promise or commitment in real life – in the way they live – then something is significantly wrong with how the Christian WAY is being presented or with how it is being understood.

But to our topic for today: Jesus was, among other things, a healer. From my perspective, Jesus never made healing the center or purpose of His ministry. In fact, He downplayed it because there was always the threat that people would come to Him for healing instead of for the New Life He was offering. Jesus did not want healing to sidetrack people from coming into and beginning to live for the Kingdom He was proclaiming. Of course, living for the Kingdom is the truest and deepest kind of healing. But we cannot get there from the outside. Therefore physical healing cannot be the focus of the mission.

In any case, I am convinced that Jesus associated miraculous healings with the third temptation He had wrestled with in the wilderness. (Luke's Gospel, chapter 4.) In compassion, Jesus would often interrupt things to heal someone. But when everything started to head toward the desire for healings, Jesus would simply depart and pick things up again later.

On a much lower level, I still identify. Each time I have wanted to encourage a congregation to get serious about healing, it has ended up sidetracking everything. That does not mean it cannot be done well; it just means I don't know how to do it well. In my experience, whenever a church starts to focus on healing, it leads things astray. We start

focusing on results; people start wanting evidence and proof that it is “working”; the physical starts to look more important than the spiritual. Then prayer starts being more about what we want – what we are asking for – until God, faith, and even our estimate of our own worth and success are judged more and more according to the results we are getting with healing. So we stopped doing that. Or at least we went underground.

Nevertheless, healing is a real and significant part of the story of Jesus’ mission and ministry. Unlike walking on water or calming storms, Jesus did teach His followers about healing and sent them forth to heal. After the Resurrection, Peter and Paul were both known for miraculous healing.

Just to keep things straight, though not to minimize the many miracles: Jesus did not heal everybody. (Matthew 13:58) Paul was unable to get free from his “thorn in the flesh.” (II Corinthians 12:8-9) The twelve disciples were quite successful when they were sent out to preach and heal, but they could not heal the epileptic boy who had been brought to them. (Matthew 17:16) My point? Often we are allowed to be witnesses and even participants in miracles of healing. We are all given special “gifts,” and some of you have special gifts for healing. I hope you are training and using them. But however marvelous the gifts, we are not in control, remember? We are following the Leader – the guidance of the Spirit. Timing is crucial, and it is not always the right time. The power is not ours, and we are careful not to take credit for it. In short, sometimes we will not be able to heal. Many stop trying because of the times they have failed. That is not a faithful response. Get used to the fact that we are not omnipotent. Do not let this stop or lessen your participation in healing.

Everybody knows there are “good doctors” and other doctors. I have, by the chance of church membership, known a fair number of incredibly good and gifted doctors. They are, hands down, the best healers in our midst. The ones I have known were drawn into their “calling” because of healing gifts within them. But these gifts were then trained and honed with years of study, practice, and collaboration with others. Some doctors have told me that they went through a time when the rigors of training and study made them nearly forget that it started with awareness that God had given them gifts for healing. But when they remembered, and combined the gifts with the training, they found a new level of competence and joy in their calling.

In any case, frequently when people tell stories of “healing,” they seem to discount our greatest healers. It is also common to hear stories of healing that say something about “the doctors said this couldn’t happen,” as if any miracle of healing is somehow putting the doctors down. If you really want to hear stories of miraculous healing, talk to the doctors. They know oodles of such stories. Naturally they tell their patients what can normally be expected from the present levels of medical knowledge, but nobody is happier than the doctors when it turns out better than expected. And many of the doctors I have known were also busy praying – before, during, and after their own ministrations. One of them in particular was frequently calling on me when he had a tough case, asking me to add in my prayers. This made me really nervous at the time. Of course, I knew that it was his skill and faith that were bringing the healing. But he was convinced that my “spiritual connections,” as he called them, were turning the tide.

Anyway, I have been around, and sometimes involved in, many miracles. If I have confused any of you, I am sorry. I believe in miracles; I do not believe in magic. Magic, as I use the word, is the breaking or suspension of natural law. Miracles do not break or suspend natural law. We call “miraculous” anything that surprises us – that brings a result we were not expecting. Life is full of mystery and miracle because our knowledge is still riddled with areas of ignorance, and with partial or wrong information. However, the fact that we don’t know everything does not excuse us for pretending we know nothing.

And there is another side of “healing” that we should at least mention. Altadena, California, was my third parish. It is not very far from Los Angeles. In the early 1970s, Kathryn Kuhlman was running a large healing mission in Los Angeles. People flocked to her services by the thousands, and a great many of them claimed they were healed by her touch. Naturally many of the members of our church were fascinated, and some of them were eager to get me to say that she had the real answers, and that we were just a tame little sideshow of mostly irrelevant Christians. I was not as loving, patient, and kind in those days as I am today. So I usually said something like: “Why don’t you go try it – get healed by Kathryn Kuhlman, and then come back here where you can do something useful for Jesus.”

Kathryn was proud of the fact that she had no theological training. She had walked a sawdust trail back in Concordia, Missouri, when she was thirteen, and that was good enough for her. Now thousands flocked

to hear her inane and simplistic messages, but of course far more came because of her power to heal. I was only jealous, of course. Thousands did not flock to me for anything. Neither did hundreds. Sometimes tens did, and among them were some who truly changed their lives. But mostly it was slow going, and a genuine transition of values and purposes. Insights can come suddenly, but follow-through is an arduous and step-at-a-time journey, no matter how eager we are to follow the new light we have seen.

An AME Zion congregation was renting our church facilities at the time. Their Pastor, Roger Willis, made a cryptic comment: “She runs a good dog-and-pony show, which brings her a lot of money and notoriety. If she really has the power to heal, why doesn’t she go to the L.A. County Hospital? There are lots of folk there who really need healing.”

Jaundice aside, Kathryn Kuhlman chose a hard life and, from my perspective, a sad one. An illicit love affair; of course, anybody can have trouble in love. Sued and accused by former friends and associates of misappropriation of funds; of course, anybody can be sued and accused. More difficult: Dr. William A. Nolen did a follow-up case study on some of the people who claimed they had been healed. His conclusion was that there were no lasting cures among them. The healings seemed to be induced by the emotional atmosphere created at the services, but the “healing” wore off after a time. Such a thing often leaves a sad kickback: “My faith is not strong enough, so now I am being punished.” Such findings are frequently discovered in the wake of famous faith healers. In any case, Kathryn Kuhlman died only a few years later, in February of 1976. She did not survive her open-heart surgery (Tulsa, Oklahoma). Doctors were not as skilled with open-heart surgery in 1976 as they are today.

I have little use for faith healing as big business, evangelical or otherwise. In the long run, it does not seem to bring honor to Jesus or to further the work of His Kingdom. That rather matches Jesus’ refusal to make healing the central purpose of His ministry. Besides, whoever Jesus healed, they were all dead a few years later (at least in our realm). Jesus was after something far bigger and greater than that. He came to invite us into a New Life that would last forever, not into a temporary fix that would last a few weeks or maybe a few years.

How many of the people Jesus healed became known leaders and followers in His mission? I can name only one: Mary Magdalene. This surprises even an old cynic like me. What happened to the gratitude?

Wouldn't we expect healing to bring about the most profound gratitude there is? Most of the time it is feeble and short-lived. Have the people you have helped the most always become your best friends and allies? Remember the ten lepers that Jesus healed: Only one came back to thank Him. Jesus said he was the only one who was deeply and truly healed.

The last time I heard about a miraculous healing was a few days ago. Mariana attends a dream group here in Port Townsend. Just this past week, one of the members of this dream group told her about her brother-in-law. He had MS and was mostly confined to a wheelchair, though he could walk a few steps if he put forth enough effort. But one night Jesus came to him in a dream and essentially said, "Rise and walk." The next morning he called his wife into the bedroom and told her about the dream. Then he threw back the covers, swung around on the bed, and got up and walked. He has been walking ever since. That was over twenty-five years ago. Meanwhile the doctors, who of course had their medical records, could never find any traces of MS in this man after the night of his dream. Do I believe in miracles? Why ask me? Go ask this woman's brother-in-law if *he* believes in miracles.

Sometimes Jesus healed people by touching them, or sometimes they were healed because they touched *Him*. Sometimes He healed people from afar who never even saw Him. Sometimes He healed people who seemed to have a lot of faith. Sometimes He healed people whose friends had faith for them. Sometimes Jesus even healed people who did not want to be healed. If we are trying to find patterns that will give us explanations, knowing the healing stories around Jesus doesn't help.

Some say Jesus healed to impress the crowds and to make people believe in Him. I never see it that way. Most of the stories that make it sound that way come from John's Gospel, forty years after Mark and Luke told their stories. Sometimes the healing stories make it sound like Jesus was angry about something. Sometimes they make it clear that it was the power of God working through Jesus, and that He was watching and waiting for the times when using this power was appropriate. Mostly I am suggesting that those who think they understand the dynamic at work in the healing ministry of Jesus have not paid attention to all the stories. What was going on is baffling and beyond our understanding. This is definitely *not* a way to say that I don't believe it; it is only to say that we do not *understand* it. And that, if you remember, is our definition of miracle: We do not understand it. If we did, we would no longer call it a miracle.

And yet: It seems to me that something within us tells us that we are destined for health and wholeness. Healing seems right, and we know on some level that healing should be our destiny. It bothers us greatly when we cannot find any way to get healed, or any way to bring healing to others we care about. Healing is more than a neutral subject for us. And healing is far more than a desire to be free from whatever ails us. Some remnant or reflection of the *imago dei* tells us that we are supposed to be healed, and that healing is the will of God.

So since I understand nothing about miracles, let me tell you a story.

In approximately 1300 B.C. (give or take a few years), Moses, who had fled from Egypt, was walking in the foothills of Mount Sinai. Presumably he was tending sheep for Jethro, his father-in-law. He came upon a bush that was aflame, yet it seemed not to be burning. Yes, another miracle – one of the most famous in our traditions.

A voice from the bush began a conversation with Moses. The result of this conversation, after considerable consternation and argument, was that Moses went back to Egypt, confronted the Pharaoh, and said to him, “Let my people go!” Of course, Moses was not just speaking for himself, but for God.

To back up a bit: Moses had been born and raised in Egypt. He was slated to be killed the moment he was born, by the orders of the current Pharaoh. All male children of the Hebrews were to be put to death. But Moses was delivered by the disobedience of his mother and sister. His very name meant “the delivered one”; it was many years later before he realized that his name also meant “the one who will be the Deliverer.” Anyway, Moses was set adrift on the Nile in a waterproof basket and was picked up by a daughter of Pharaoh. She thought he was precious and took him and raised him in her own house. So Moses grew up as a prince in Egypt. Later, as a grown man, he killed an Egyptian guard who was beating one of the Hebrew slaves. When the other slaves, in appreciation, threatened to expose him to the Egyptian authorities, Moses ran for his life – clear out of Egypt.

So now Moses was back in Egypt, and back with a message. He was probably talking with a more recent Pharaoh – somebody he used to know; somebody he grew up with. How else would Moses keep getting an audience with Pharaoh? And how could he keep walking back into Pharaoh’s court for a follow-up conversation? Mostly they leave out that

part of the story. In any case, Moses said to Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” Pharaoh did not immediately comply; it would not have been good for the economy. But over time, what with a few plagues and all, the Children of Israel (that is, the children of Jacob), were freed from bondage in Egypt. They went with Moses to Mount Sinai, where they received a special Covenant with God. But they refused to go into the Promised Land at God’s direction because they were afraid of the people who already lived there. So they wandered around the Sinai Peninsula for forty years while their children grew up. God was hoping that their children, not raised with a slave mentality, would be more obedient than their parents. Sure enough, the next generation did march into the Promised Land. But they were not perfectly obedient either. In fact, this began a long history of partial obedience, partial trust in God, partially keeping the Covenant, and partial blessings mixed with ever-increasing curses. The upshot was that the descendants ended up in slavery again, this time in Babylon.

The story continues, in fits and starts, but I don’t have the heart to tell much more of it this morning.

I will start the telling of another story, however. It is the story of a Second Moses – and a Second Covenant. The Second Moses is of course Jesus. He also is a “Deliverer.” He came to free people from a far greater slavery than our ancestors had experienced in Egypt. Life on earth is a greater bondage than most people are willing to face or acknowledge. Pharaoh is not the only tyrant. Making bricks is not the only fate from which we need to be set free.

Those of us who find ourselves alive on Planet Earth, do find – if we are honest – that we are enslaved by many things: by fear; by guilt; by alienation from ourselves, from each other, even from God. We are trapped in loneliness, wandering in deserts without purpose, identity, or any known release – without any way out. For a while, at least, we try to deal with this bondage by refusing to acknowledge it: We pretend we are okay. We pretend we are in control. We pretend we know who we are and what we are doing here. In short, we combat the rising panic with pride; with a pretended self-confidence; with a growing desire to use and control the people around us. Or we go to the opposite end of the spectrum: We pretend we are useless, helpless, abused, and misused, and we think that if we can get pathetic enough, maybe some of the other people will feel sorry for us and take care of us.

In either case, we use the tools of denial and addiction. We combat one form of slavery with yet another. So we fall victim to either our pride or to one of our numerous outer desires. They are sometimes called “the seven deadly sins.” Any one of the seven has the power to enslave us, but most of us prefer them in various combinations. Why deal with only one of the seven deadly sins when we can have three or four of them, or even all seven? And all of us discover – though not all of us admit it – that we do not know how to extricate ourselves from this slavery, or from the many marks and shackles of our bondage.

Into this spiritual prison house there came a Second Moses. And He said, “Let my people go!”

But Satan said “No!” And the demons said “No!” And all our fancier names for the powers and principalities that keep us in bondage said “No!” That is, our complexes, our addictions, our many idols of health, wealth, success, and security all said “No! You must continue to bow down to us, and to worship the golden image and all the false promises that we have set up.”

Somewhat quietly, at least in comparison to most Deliverers, Jesus declared a new kind of freedom: a deliverance from Sin, Death, and the Devil. And He said, “You are not the children of any of these idols. You are the children of my Father in Heaven – the children of the true God who loves you dearly, and completely. Turn from the bondage that has you chained down, and trust the true God. The bondage is not real. You only keep it real because you believe in it. You are hypnotized by the threats and fooled by the bribes. ‘Do not fear him who can kill only the body, and after that, has no more that he can do to you.’ I pronounce and declare that you are free. Claim the love, the forgiveness, and the true destiny you have from God. And follow me. I will lead you to the true Promised Land. You can sense that it is real and true even here, but it is not here in its fullness. We are going to live in and for the Kingdom of my Father. You can follow me and live for the true Kingdom whenever you decide to – whenever you truly want to. And in truth, soon you will *be* in the real Kingdom – in the next realm – in what people call ‘Heaven,’ though most of them do not really believe in it.”

Sure enough, most of the followers only partially believed it. They got free from some things but not from others. They sort of entered the Promised Land, but they took part of their fear and greed and loneliness with them. They sort of trusted their new Lord and they really appreciated Jesus in lots of ways, but they kept the right to run their own lives

in some ways also. And of course in every way that they stayed attached to the old ways, they weren't really free from them. So some of the bondage continued. At times, some of them went completely back to their former slavery, but many of them still used the language of the new freedom. And that confuses some people still today.

Along the way, Jesus sometimes ran into people who carried the marks of this bondage in various forms of physical ailments. In other words, Satan had them bound not only on the inside, but also on the outside. This really annoyed Jesus. Satan had no right to keep God's children abused and hurt in physical diseases. They didn't belong to Satan – they belonged to God. But for as long as they didn't know they belonged to God, Satan could convince them they had no choice but to be sick – no choice but to bear the marks of Satan's influence as if it were greater than God's influence.

When Jesus came across such people, He would order the false powers to depart. In short, Jesus said to Satan, or to his servant demons, "Let my people go!" And His authority was such that when directly confronted, His enemies had no choice. They had to let go. So these people were freed, at least for a while. Some of them stayed free, and some of them invited various demons to come back and live with them. You think people don't like the demons? Some of us love our various demons and think life would not be worth living without them. Yes, of course: Jesus warned us about this as well.

Anyway, finally Satan got really pissed. He got sick and tired of having Jesus expose the fact that he had no true authority, and that all of his games were bluff and bluster. So he made a really concerted effort to gather in and influence all those he could control with fear or with images of how they were losing their earthly goodies. He persuaded them that Jesus was really an evil and dangerous influence. As a result, they banded together and plotted to kill Jesus. Even though Jesus knew their plot, He decided it was time for a showdown: time for people to see and realize who they really trusted and what they were really afraid of. So He let the disguise drop and let people know that He really was the true Messiah and the Son of God – and that they could choose and claim Him for their true and rightful King if they really wanted to. This only frightened His enemies more, and even His friends were too confused or too afraid to stand with Him at the time.

So they crucified Him. But it caused the biggest backfire in all the annals of earth history: Death could not hold Him. He came back in a spiritual form more real than any physical form we have ever known. Then more and more people began to ask themselves and to realize: Who did we kill – and why? Who are we that we keep siding with Satan’s minions? Why are we so afraid to trust and believe in God? And how is it that even though we have killed Jesus, the true Messiah who is now risen from death as we know it, we are not being destroyed – punished for what we did to Him? Can it possibly be true that what He was trying to tell us is real? That God loves us? Wants to forgive us? Longs to restore and redeem us?

Many generations later, these questions and this warfare continue. Can Satan keep us bound? Can Jesus deliver us? Would you rather be healed of a physical ailment or of a spiritual ailment (freed from sin, fear, loneliness, and the seven deadly sins)? Well, why not both?

That is the real question, isn’t it? Why not both? Is it possible to be truly and deeply forgiven – fully and completely reconciled to the omniscient all-powerful God who loves you – and still be sick or enslaved by anything? *“Which is easier: to say ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say ‘Rise and walk?’”*

To be fully forgiven is to be completely accepted. Another word we use for it is “love.” We know the catch: there is no forgiveness without repentance. And Jesus made the link between love and forgiveness nearly absolute. Is this too much theory, too much theology?

What drew the thousands to Kathryn Kuhlman? Were none of them healed? We only heard about follow-up case studies on a handful. Kathryn had a simple, almost childish message about love and forgiveness. With so much smoke, was there *no* fire? In the atmosphere of her services, did people start to actually believe in God’s love and forgiveness – even for themselves? And did they then actually feel the power of His healing working within?

Where did they go after the services? Back into the false world that we call “the real world.” And so it began to fade for most of them. With the many voices and influences of the false world all around them, how could they hold on to the brief glimpse of real truth they had felt? Kathryn herself lived in the false world, when she was not in her temple. So she also succumbed to its bondage and its lies. A wonderful, big-hearted

woman who really wanted to help and heal people, but that was not enough to pull it all together.

Can any of us be really healed? There is no such thing as a partial or temporary fix against Satan or his bondage. And we still live in a broken world – a temporal, limited realm – far from Heaven. And yet ... And yet ...

Is Jesus still saying, “Let my people go”? He is still saying, “Come to this table. This is my body broken for you, my blood poured out for you.”