

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

January 25, 2009

HEALTH SUNDAY

2 Kings 5:1-14; Mark 5:21; 25-34

Body, Mind and Spirit

A couple of months ago at a meeting, our Parish Nurses who constitute the Health Ministries Team of the church, wondered if a Health Sunday might be included in our church year. The United Church of Christ agrees with our folks as I discovered in looking through the UCC calendar. January Twenty-fifth has, in fact been declared Health Sunday by those in the UCC who direct the health ministries of our denomination. So today, because of the request of our Parish Nurses, we are making use of this designated Sunday to reflect on Health and Wholeness for each of us, for our families and our human family.

When I look around this sacred space, I realize how health issues have affected all of us either personally or in family situations. When I was a child I would get high fevers. My mother would give me aspirin, rub me down with alcohol and sprinkle me with powder. When my children had fevers I would give them children's Tylenol, put them in a tub of lukewarm water or get in the shower with them, hating their cries but knowing that was the right course of treatment to bring down the 104 degree fever. In her fear, my mother prayed to God for help. In my fear, I prayed to God for help. Remedies change but that cry for help is with us all. And we have prayed, haven't we, for those we hold dear. We have prayed for those being treated for cancer; for those having heart surgery or hip replacement. We have prayed for strength and peace for those with chronic conditions and we have prayed for those struggling with Depression.

We have witnessed the miracles of science as the surgery of young children born with health issues gives them new life. We have witnessed those same miracles as we have celebrated with so many who have undergone cancer surgery and chemo and not only survive; they thrive. Young, old and in between; we have all experienced fears. Often we have experienced relief. Just as often, we have come together to grieve the death of those for whom medicine could do no more. Even in those times, we have been in the holy place where the spirit of one we love has been welcomed into the wonders of eternity. And we pray for those who mourn that they might find healing peace and the joy of fond memories.

Wholeness is that glorious intersection where body, mind and spirit are in happy balance. I doubt that we are conscious of our yearning but each in our own ways we seek wholeness. We make choices for wholeness all the time. We choose to park the car a bit further away from the grocery store or take the stairs rather than the elevator or avoid the extra helping of dessert. We choose to read a book or listen to music or see a thoughtfully made movie. We choose to quilt or knit or do carpentry. In all these body, mind and spirit choices we recognize our responsibility to care for ourselves because we are, after all, the finest of God's works of creation, and caring for creation is our human responsibility

Each of us is a miracle. We recognize this miracle at the birth of a child, staring in wonder at the beautiful, tiny body that is a sublime expression of life itself. The strong desire to protect that child wells up in each of us as we hold sacred that small body. Sacred though those precious moments are, somehow, that celebration of life gets lost in chaos of daily reality. How often do we look in the mirror with wonder at

ourselves? Do we see the whole or are we fixated on the pieces that are not perfection in our eyes? We start early in life. As, for instance, young people go through High School they struggle with the anxieties of acceptance by peers. At that most vulnerable time, eating disorders and flirtation with drugs and alcohol wound those miraculous bodies. Often, youth find it difficult to believe that each one of them is precious and unique and they desperately want to fit in. When my children reached that explosive age, the prayers I said were a mantra, “Keep them safe, O God.” Have you said that same prayer?

The older we become the more difficult it is to look with wonder into the mirror or even to look at one’s hands. A long time ago, in my forties, when I was young but thought I was aging, I happened to look at my hands and said, “O my gosh, these are my mother’s hands!” I look at my hands today and say, Yikes, these are my grandmother’s hands.”

At 26, life is good. We know everything and are happy to share our wisdom. We are filled with energy and optimism. We are certain that we have the world in the palm of our hands. If we think on it at all, we are certain that we are whole in body, mind and spirit. But we have not yet been tempered by life so that the wholeness is a fragile structure, as we will discover in the challenges and disappointments that bring wisdom.

The older we grow, the harder it is to experience wonder. When we are sixteen, we are going to live forever and all we need is acne medicine. When we begin to get those over the hill birthday cards, many of us are already keeping pharmaceutical companies in business with prescriptions to keep cholesterol down and osteoporosis at bay. We are already feeling the aches of arthritis; waiting for our cataracts to get big enough to be removed and receiving mail describing the wonders of high tech hearing

aids. AARP welcomes us into membership and the really good thing is that we begin to get discounts for our movie tickets. Still, wonder does not often well up in our spirits even when we pay less to see Clint Eastwood be old on film.

Wholeness is difficult to maintain when the body slows down, the mind begins to forget and the spirit requires constant vigil. Do you recall the song written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller and sung by Peggy Lee: "Is that all there is?" The refrain stays in my mind:

Is that all there is?
Is that all there is?
If that's all there is, my friend,
Then let's keep dancing,
If that's all there is.

I was 26 when I heard that song and, thank God, I did know better. There is no hope in that song. There is no wholeness. There is no God. To be healthy requires more than age or prescriptions. It is a commitment to wonder. Whatever life holds; the good and the challenging elements are what refine us, what give us that wholeness, that health.

Today's readings from Scripture may, perhaps, shed some light on our innate yearning for wholeness yet equally innate inability to overcome that which keeps us from the wholeness that we seek.

Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Aram had all that life could provide; status, wealth, the respect of the king. He had everything except his health. Suffering from Leprosy, he was without hope of a cure until an insignificant slave girl captured from Israel suggested that he might obtain a cure from the great prophet of Israel, Elisha. Naaman's wholeness began with that slave who had compassion for her owner. We know nothing about this girl, not even her name. We know only that her

compassion was stronger than her bonds and her goodness greater than all his wealth. Filled with his own importance as well as his Leprosy, Naaman traveled to Israel. When with all his servants, chariots, horses and ego, he arrived at the home of Elisha he expected a royal welcome and an immediate cure. Elisha did not come running out bowing and scraping before the might of Aram's war chief. He sent a message telling Naaman that he would have to work for his cure by bathing seven times in the Jordan River. In a rage, Naaman stormed off. Only the calming words of yet another anonymous servant saved Naaman. Most likely grumbling all the way, Naaman went down to the Jordan and bathed as commanded. He returned to Elisha cured, humbled, converted and whole in body, mind and spirit.

What does this story tell us? Sometimes we can't see our own dis-ease and need to listen to and accept the suggestions that come from those who love us. Sometimes we are the loved one who must find within herself the courage to make the suggestion. Naming the disease does not cure it. Naming is only the first step. Each person must find her own strength to take the second step. Each must discover within himself the courage to reach out for help and to do what is necessary to find healing, including accepting the limitations that might accompany that healing. Bring God into the healing process and one moves from hopelessness to wholeness. It takes courage to step into the healing water. But God is present and will never leave. As the waters of Surgery, Counseling, therapy, AA; whatever that healing process is, wash away the dis-ease, the wonder of life in balance returns for the individual and often for his or her family.

The second reading is familiar to most of us. A woman had spent 12 years and all her money seeking a cure for a hemorrhage. What Mark doesn't mention is that this poor

woman was considered unclean because of her condition and thus separated from her community. There was no one to whom she could turn because just by touching another, she would make them unclean as well. This story brings back to me the horror of the early days of AIDS. Persons with HIV/Aids were treated as harshly as that woman. Shunted aside, they could rarely find even the comforts of religion. Not only the persons with Aids but also their families were denied the embrace of many church communities in their time of pain and grief. Thank God that there were congregations and clergy who modeled themselves on Jesus, opening their hearts and their arms in welcoming support. Thank God that I was a part of one of those congregations and was given the opportunity to be among those clergy who, understanding their role, formed a group that stood with those with Aids.

With no one to share her fears or to provide comfort, with no one to care, this lonely woman lived on the margins of her community. Jesus was her only hope. Not wanting to touch him and make him unclean, she reached into the dust to touch the hem of his garment and she was healed.

No one should live in isolation on the margins. No one should worship on the margins. And where do we find Christ? On the margins with the lost and lonely. Wholeness is not simply an individual in balance, it is a community in balance. How can we ensure that all are welcome here; young and old, children with running feet; elders using walkers; all of us in between? Children asking questions during the Word of God and in Church School; their parents seeking answers to life's conundrums; their grandparents sharing the wisdom of their years. People with glad hearts and people with confused minds and pain-filled lives all belong. People filled with energy and life;

people torn by life's disappointments; fearful people; hopeless people; ourselves. All God's people.

This is Health Sunday, may we each hold God's hand and gaze in wonder at the miracle that is each of us; body, mind and spirit and know that we each; we all are precious in God's sight. Amen.