

For the healing of the nations, Part 2: being sick
Luke 4:18–19; Revelation 22.1-5; Genesis 3:6-11a

Last Sunday, in part 1 of this sermon series, we began with *being healed*, noting that it was an experience of healing that placed us into the Christian narrative that we're living. There is something about Jesus, the Christ, the Anointed One that is healing.

So healing is our beginning. But any talk about healing implies being sick, or unwell in one way or another, whether in body or spirit, whether emotionally or physically or mentally. And if we are *not* sick, we can't be healed. Right? To claim healing is to acknowledge that we've been sick.

Which might have us wondering why this sermon series didn't begin with *being sick*. That was my first plan. Until there was a moment of insight, the Light of Spirit saying, "Begin with healing. The Christian narrative isn't linear." Yes! The story of Jesus, the Anointed One, begins at the end. We are living into the Jesus narrative not because Jesus was born, but because Jesus is resurrected! And his resurrection gives us hope for our own resurrection. And resurrection is healing. And healing is resurrection. So our story as followers of Jesus is a story that always begins with resurrection, with healing.

This past spring and summer a communion liturgy that we used a number of times began with these words:

We stand in the resurrection garden of God –
a place suffused and shaped by love
and ripe with its potential....ⁱ

I'm recalling these words because, in the Jesus narrative, it is only from the resurrection garden of God that we can talk about being sick. It is from our home in the resurrection garden of God, as we are healing and being healed, that we hear the Genesis creation stories, and the story of the Garden of Eden, and of Adam and Eve eating the apple.

We refer to this eating of the apple as original sin. But, standing in the resurrection garden of God, I wonder. That may have been the original sin. But surely it's the cover-up after that causes human beings to be sick. Adam and Eve ate the prohibited fruit. And instead of telling the truth about what they did, instead of exposing themselves, instead of being naked, they instead sewed leaves together to cover themselves. And then they hid from God.

And when God asks where they are, Adam says, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." It is this fear that causes human beings to be sick. Our sickness, as human communities, is the result of fear, and hiding, covering up our fear, hiding from the truth about what we did or didn't do.

But from the resurrection garden of God, a garden filled with love and forgiveness, from here we're able to see that we've been sick because we were afraid. And our fear was that God wouldn't love us anymore. And wouldn't want to be with us. We were sick with fear that if God saw us at our worst, we'd no longer be loved by God. We were afraid we'd be separated from God, no longer belonging to God.

But in the resurrection garden of God, the "place suffused and shaped by love," as we are being healed, we've begun to understand what it means that God is love. Our bodies and beings are being healed by this bottomless and limitless love that is God. As our flesh and bones, and our emotions and spirits are healing, we begin to sense and know this unbound God that is love. As we heal, we learn to trust that we can stand naked, that we can be vulnerable and exposed, not only with God, but in a community of other human beings who are also being healed, who are also being suffused and shaped by God who is love.

Now that we're wrapped securely in God's healing and resurrecting love, we can talk freely about being sick. We can talk about our fears and our impulse to cover up and hide.

I'm well aware of the theologies (if we can call them that) that speak of original sin and nakedness as shameful. That human beings are morally and spiritually depraved. That we're a huge disappointment to God. And that no matter how hard we try, God will only begrudgingly save us. If not our bodies, at least our souls. Some of us grew up with these abusive theologies that heaped more fear onto us.

They're wrong. From the God that Jesus, the Anointed One revealed, we can confidently declare them wrong!

But I'm not saying that we human beings don't sin and that we don't sometimes do bad or even terrible and shameful things. As a species, we are sinners. Our sinfulness isn't an aberration. It isn't because there was a flaw or mistake in God's creation design. Sin is part of what it means to be human.

And being sick is also part of our humanity. In the biblical Story, and most clearly in the Gospels, sin and sickness are treated as the same. When Jesus healed people, their bodies may have been cured, but what he often said to accompany the healing is, "Your sins are forgiven." In the ancient world, before the body was separated from the spirit, there was an assumption that sin caused bodily sickness or disabilities, that sickness and death were God's punishment for sin. But from witnessing Jesus' healings we can be certain that bodily sickness is not punishment or failure. It isn't punishment for sins nor is it personal failure.

Jesus may have uncoupled punishment and sickness, but that relationship continues to live deep within us. We still tend to think that if we have faith, that if our sins are forgiven then our bodies should be healed. Without being aware of it, we think of disease as failure and fault. Without our conscious consent, we think that if we're good, that if we're following Jesus, we *shouldn't* be sick. Disease and disability, sickness and death aren't God's judgment or our own failure; they're simply the design and limits of our biology. The leaves that are

falling from the trees aren't failing; they're doing what they've been designed to do! And they're doing it magnificently!

There is a deeper sickness than the biological sickness in our bodies, there is the being sick that we see in Adam and Eve's covering up and hiding. Unlike the sicknesses that are brought about by viruses and bacteria and other pathologies, this deeper sickness is something that we can take responsibility for. That we do have choice in.

Human fear of being unloved by God rightly leaves us vulnerable. And human beings have gotten really good at covering and hiding. But it's the fear of being unloved, of not belonging, of being rejected that has us doing so much harm to each other. Individually and as communities and nations, rather than exposing our weaknesses and vulnerabilities, our mistakes and wrongdoings, we instead strive to be strong, to win. Afraid that God's love is limited, we're in constant competition with others, fearing they'll get God's love and we won't.

From our place in the resurrection garden we're able to see and identify the human mechanism of covering and hiding. Outside of that garden, it's hard, if not impossible, to see.

Because we know ourselves loved by God, because we're being healed, we can stand naked and tell the truth, "I ate the apple." "My behavior was petty and vindictive." "I lied." The Good News of God's healing is that we don't have to be afraid to tell the truth. We can stand naked and confess our sins. And we can bear the weight of their consequences. We can because we're standing in the resurrection garden of love, where forgiveness is already given, where we're a part of the Body of Christ.

The garden in Revelation is a resurrection garden. Unlike in the Garden of Eden where leaves were used for covering up and hiding, in this city garden the leaves are for the healing

of the peoples. The word here that's used for *healing* is *therapeia*. The word means *to heal* or *to minister*. And it isn't used very often in the Bible. (English words, such as *therapeutic* and *therapy* come from this word.)

That John, in his Revelation of Jesus, the Anointed One, chose the word *therapia* rather than one of the other, more common words, is interesting. He could have written, "the leaves are for the *saving* of the peoples." Or, the leaves are for the *liberation* of the nations." But he didn't. The leaves are for healing, for ministering.

As communities and nations we have been sick for a long, a very long time. Our wounds are profound. Our scars are tender in some places and thick and hard in other places. And our pain is sometimes excruciating. But in the resurrection garden, where God and the Lamb are on the throne, the leaves of the tree of life are touching our wounds and healing our pain. And the fruit of that tree is for all to eat, to be nourished. And satisfied. And healed.

ⁱ *from Transformed by Life, Wild Goose Publications*