

## **FIRST AID**

We're going to try a little experiment this morning. What is our automatic response most of the time when someone asks, "How are you today?" Chances are we are "fine" even when we are anything but fine.

In a few seconds, I am going to ask, "How are you today." Everyone here needs to respond with, "awful." Even if you really are fine today, say "awful" and it will make up for a previous time you told a white lie by saying you were fine.

So, how are you today? (Congregation responds) Now, didn't that feel good?

A week ago today, I was standing in my parents' church in Tucson. My sister Shannon had been admitted to the hospital the day before. People who asked Dad about Shannon received an update from Dad on what was going on. But one time when someone just asked in general, "How are you doing," Dad's response was "fine."

When we are not fine, we shouldn't lie in church and say we are. Of all places, this should be where we can be honest when we are hurting mentally and physically along with spiritually. Churches were never intended as museums for saints; churches are intended to be hospitals for the hurting and communities for healing.

In seminary, our chancellor Leonard Sweet told us as pastors, our three primary tasks are to do the things Jesus did: to teach, to preach and to heal. Some of us questioned the idea of healing. To date, none of us had made a blind man see, that was for sure.

But I'll never forget Leonard Sweet's response: If we aren't healing, then we are hurting. If we are Christians, then we are to be like Jesus and bring healing to any situation in which a fellow human being is hurting.

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Certainly people sought Jesus for the express purpose of being healed. Bear in mind that during the time of Jesus, physicians were a rarity. Only the wealthy could afford a doctor's care – if you could call it that. Remember the story of the woman who touched Jesus' hem to be healed? She had been suffering from an issue of blood for 12 years. Scripture says she had seen doctors, but if anything, she was worse instead of better.

Nowadays if we get a headache, we blame our sinuses, the weather, stress or some other trigger and we take an aspirin. In those days, medicine was a new science; doctors didn't have the diagnostic tests we have today.

Instead, doctors blamed evil spirits for any type of pain, physical or mental. And you know what the number one remedy they had for relief? They would drill a pinpoint hole in their skull. Doctors believed this procedure would release the evil spirit inside a person and stop the pain it was causing. In one old cemetery, scientists discovered holes in six out of 120 skulls.

No wonder people were flocking to see Jesus. To some degree, we see it still today. I know a number of people who began attending church because a loved one was diagnosed with terminal illnesses. When people have nowhere else to turn, they finally turn to God.

And God wants so much more. God doesn't want to be our last recourse; God wishes we would come to Him first when we need aid of any kind. Whatever the need, God knows what it is and the best solution for us.

God wants us to be healthy and whole people. That is how God created us. However, we need to understand that God will heal us in His own way, in the manner best suited to His will.

Probably all of us wish that healing would be as it was in today's story: an instantaneous healing. I should mention that exorcisms in Jesus' day were common even among the Jews. But

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exorcisms usually involved elaborate rituals, spells and incantations. Jesus with one word drove the demon from the man. No one had seen that kind of authority before.

We still hear instances today of this type of healing. People who were facing surgery had prayers offered on their behalf and, on the day of the surgery, X-rays show that the tumor or abnormality has disappeared. Doctors can't always explain it, but we almost always attribute this to God.

But that is only one form of healing. And whether we receive this type of healing or not has nothing to do with our level of faith. It has to do with God's will for that person.

Even when Jesus walked this earth, not every healing was immediate. In John 9, Jesus put mud on a blind man's eyes and the man had to walk down the street to wash his face before he could see. That is the second form of healing that God may offer: a healing that takes place over time. It may involve surgery, medicine and rehab. Whatever treatment is prescribed, eventually the person is healed, and God deserves as much credit was in the first scenario.

Then there is a third form of healing: there won't be a cure, but there will be acceptance by the individual. Thursday when Dave and I were on a plane from Tucson to Atlanta, we encountered some of the worst turbulence I've ever experienced. At one point, the pilot instructed the flight attendants to take their seats and strap themselves in. And yet, while the plane was tossing and dropping and feeling like a roller coaster, I had my head on Dave's shoulder – and felt at peace.

God invites us at times to enter into this kind of healing. The illness doesn't disappear, but we are at peace. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul writes of how he deals with an unnamed affliction.

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Speculation over that affliction has included moral temptations, persecution and physical ailments ranging from epilepsy to just being very near sighted.

Whatever it is, Paul prayed three times for God to remove it from him. And in 12:9, he says the eventual answer from God was, “My grace is sufficient.” In other words, God was not going to remove the affliction, but promised to give Paul the courage and strength to bear it.

The final form of healing is one we might not consider. When a person is so ill that continued physical life would cause nothing but suffering, God heals people through death. God takes the soul from a diseased body so both can be at peace. For those who believe in the resurrection, there is still grieving, but there is the assurance that the person has been healed through the resurrection of Jesus.

God is the one who heals; we as God’s followers are to enter into this world of offering healing to others. How do we do this?

First, when we don’t know what to say, say nothing. Remember that old saying: “sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never harm me.” Nothing can be farther from the truth. Even well-meaning words can hurt and do harm when we find ourselves just rattling off platitudes in the face of someone’s suffering. So don’t be afraid to say nothing.

Instead, feel free to hug the person and say, “I’m so sorry.” And then instead of speaking, let the person talk. Let us express our deepest fears and concerns and angers without passing judgment. Sometimes just releasing these hurts is like releasing steam from the pressure cooker.

Also, offer to do anything that could assist that person: do their laundry, get their groceries or bring over a meal. For my parents, it was a blessing when I told them I would stay with Shannon so they could go out one evening and have a break.

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Most of all, when we ask someone, “how are you today,” and they say “fine” – and we see from their faces they are not fine – stop them and ask genuinely, “No, really – how are you doing.” Ask about their loved ones by name. And when you hear our prayer concerns on Sundays, write down the names and pray for these people in the coming week.

If we aren’t healing, then we are hurting. As God’s community this week, may we be healers that others may come to know God as the one who gives all healing.