

Scripture: Matthew 8:1-17
Message: These Hands Heal
March 10, 2019; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON
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There is some very interesting imagery in the telling of these stories of healing by Matthew. The chapter starts with “When he came down from the mountainside...”

The previous three chapters tell of why Jesus was on the mountain: he was teaching his disciples and the crowds what has been called “the Sermon on the Mount.” A large crowd is gathered to listen, with rapt attention, to this teacher (see Matthew 4:25, 5:1). They are amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority (see Matthew 7:28-29). Jesus taught about the kingdom of God, a new standard for living to turn the world upside down.

It was such a moving experience! That’s why we sometimes use the term “mountaintop experiences.” We’re on the top of the world, inspired by the speaker or the musician or the book we just read or the mission trip or conference. Then we come home to a sink full of dirty dishes or the dog has thrown up on the carpet or the sump pump broke and the basement is flooded.

“When he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him....A centurion came asking for help....He saw Peter’s mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever....Many who were demon-possessed were brought to him.”

And then, at the end of this section of 3 miracles of healing, Matthew quotes from Isaiah 53, “He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.”

Isaiah 53 is a chapter often quoted in connection with the death of Jesus on the cross. But it’s really about the ministry and life of Jesus. Jesus came to bring comfort and hope and healing in the face of so much sickness. He came to show victory over the destructive power of sin, a power seen in death as well as in sickness.

First there is the leper. A leper was seen as an outcast from society. The skin disease was considered contagious and so the leper was to spend his life away from family and friends, outside the villages. Whenever anyone came near, they were to call out “Unclean! Unclean!” as a warning.

This leper is being bold in coming to Jesus and not keeping his distance. He reveals

his respect by kneeling in worship. He reveals his trust by not *demanding* healing. Instead he acknowledges that if Jesus is *willing*, he could heal the leprosy.

The response of Jesus is very revealing of his ministry. “Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.” Jesus *touched* the “unclean” leper. According to the religious law, that would make Jesus unclean. But for Jesus, the heart of ministry is more important. Who knows how long it has been since this leper has felt a human touch? As if a word is not enough, Jesus touches him, and heals him. Now he can return to his family and community.

The next miracle is in response to the plea of a centurion, an officer in the Roman army. Just as the leper was an outcast from society, so also the centurion, a Gentile, was outside of the people of God.

The centurion also does not specifically ask Jesus to do something. He informs Jesus that he has a servant at home and in terrible pain. When Jesus offers to go and heal him, the centurion is quick to stop Jesus. Perhaps he knows that Jesus, as a Jew, was not allowed in the home of a Gentile for that would make Jesus unclean. But another reason is that this centurion has a tremendous faith in the healing power of Jesus. He testifies to his faith in the divine authority of Jesus’ words by describing the human authority of his own position as centurion. Describing how his commands can make things happen expresses his faith that Jesus can speak and heal.

Jesus commends his faith and heals the servant. Just as he touched the unclean leper, he enters, as it were, into the unclean house of the Gentile with his healing power and the servant is better.

Then we read of Jesus entering the house of Peter where he finds Peter’s mother-in-law sick with a fever. Again we read that Jesus “touched her hand and the fever left her.” We might not think anything of this action, but in Jesus’ day, it was unacceptable for a man to touch a woman who was not his wife. Women did not have the same status or respect of men. Jesus breaks down that division and touches her to heal her.

To help understand the message of these miracles, we can consider the practice of worship at the temple, which was the symbol of God’s presence. The leper would not be allowed anywhere near the temple. His sickness made him unclean. The centurion however, as a Gentile, would be allowed to come to the temple, to the outer court called the Court of the Gentiles. It was still outside the place of central worship, but the Gentile could approach God

to worship. After passing through the outer court of the Gentiles, you would find the Court of the Women. Women could observe, but not go further into the temple to worship; only men could go there.

(Or consider using our church to illustrate the religious practice of Jesus' day: the leper is outside at the back of the parking lot, the centurion is only allowed in the hallway and the women can only come as far as the Fellowship Hall. Only the men would be allowed in the sanctuary.)

Each of these people were viewed in that society as unclean, separate, excluded. Jesus reaches out, touches, and heals. These hands heal, breaking down the walls of division and separation.

Each person is separated from others by their disease: the leper is an outcast from society, the servant cannot fulfill his duties to the master, Peter's mother-in-law cannot serve her family. Through the healing word and healing touch of Jesus, each one is restored to their intended relationship. The wall of separation is broken down.

Jesus comes down from the mountainside and lives out the message of the kingdom that he has just finished teaching about. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted....Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened. Love your enemies."

The hands of Jesus touch those who are lonely and marginalized and sick, with a promise of healing and hope and restoration. It is not necessary to list our demands to Jesus and expect him to act. We can come to Jesus in trust and find that he understands, he cares, he will give his blessing. That might be a blessing of healing. It might be a blessing of comfort. It may be a blessing of hope and friendship. It is an expression of the grace of the kingdom of God to bring the touch and healing and hope of his presence.

Disciples of Jesus do more than learn the teachings of their rabbi. They also desire to be like him. We are not only to read and learn the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, we are to live it out in our daily lives. Come down from the mountainside to reach out to the marginalized with the healing touch of grace. These hands at the end of our arms can bring the touch of Jesus to the marginalized around us.

Who are they? Who are the people who are looked down on or separated from the

mainstream of society? Whom do we quickly label as an outcast? Who are the people you would feel very uncomfortable, or even unwelcome, to have sit beside you in our worship service or fellowship gathering? Who are the people that would feel uncomfortable or feel somewhat excluded? We might dispute their feelings and say that they are welcome just like everyone else. But do we actually reach out to them with the touch of grace? Are the words of grace that we can speak so eloquently followed up by actions?

We don't have leprosy in our communities. We don't call people Gentiles. We have come to a greater level of equality between genders and do not see women as second class citizens. But who would be the people that Jesus calls us to include, to touch with his grace? Whom do we label and avoid and refuse to touch?

How meaningful is the presence and touch of a friend in a difficult time? A hug, an arm around the shoulder, a hand holding yours, can speak so much more than words.

Who needs the comfort and blessing and healing that comes from the touch of your hand?

What attitudes do you have to change? What barriers do you need to break down? Is there a touch of grace that you can extend?

It's a serious calling. We hear it in the miracle of the healing of the centurion's servant. Jesus celebrates that many will come from unexpected places to be part of the family of God and feast at his table. Walls of separation will be broken down. But the warning of judgment is to those who think they are comfortably inside, those who are living a life of exclusion toward others, a life of selfish possession of this grace of God.

Who are the outsiders that need to hear the message and feel the touch of welcome into the presence of God and his people?

These hands. They came to touch and heal. Through you and I, as disciples of Jesus, his hands continue to touch and heal. Reach out to someone who feels like an outcast, who is treated with exclusion, whom you have excluded with a longstanding grudge. Share with them, in word and in touch, the grace of God. And see the miracle of God's power work in their life. And in yours.

Amen.