

Please Note: The following Sermon Manuscript was used quite closely at the 8:45 a.m. Service and provided the framework for the sermon at the 11:00 a.m. Service. The actual 11:00 Sermon as delivered is more accurately seen by viewing the video of that Service. Jim Simpson.

Our worship and preaching theme in this month of September seeks to express the promise of wholeness and healing from God. God desires wholeness and healing for all because this is who God is. As Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer, God can do nothing else than continue to offer wholeness and healing expressive of God's nature which is love! God is always and ever expressing and practicing love to all aspects of creation. The wholeness offered by God and to which God calls all of us is at one and the same time both individual and communal. As recipients, beneficiaries and witnesses of God's wholeness we are called and expected to live such that we and others, many others, can like us, come to receive and experience the divine gifts of healing, reconciliation and renewal.

Both of today's scripture passages speak to this wholeness, in terms of God's activity and the expectations and implications of our shared life as the Body of Christ, the community of welcome, faith and hospitality. Both readings touch on words, words spoken to promote wholeness, words of faith, of confession, of reconciliation, of forgiveness, of restoration within community, words that we might well describe as "kind words."

A lonely stranger went into a deserted restaurant, somewhere at the back of beyond, on the road to and from nowhere... you can likely imagine the scene. He took a few minutes to get the attention of the waitress though he was the only guy sitting at a table and he ordered the breakfast special. When his order arrived, he looked up, longingly at the waitress, hoping for at least a brief conversation, and asked her, "How about a kind word?" The waitress leaned over and whispered, "Don't eat the meat!!" More than likely not the "kind word" the man had in mind...

The Letter of James was addressed to the Twelve Tribes of the Diaspora, written to a community, indeed a community of communities. The Letter stresses the shared, communal life of the church and locates the role of the individual within the context of the life of the community. We would do well to read the brief letter in its entirety and discover it all over again not as a laundry list of do's and don'ts but more as a description of what the ideal Christian community, the ideal Christian church, is and does.

In previous Chapters the writer of the Letter has stressed that the Church of Jesus Christ is not to be divided by class and poverty. The church, the community of the followers of Jesus, is expected to be a community within which members are equal and all share one another's burdens and joys. In today's passage we hear how in the same way, grief and illness and sin is not to divide the Body of Christ. The very specific instruction that the one who is afflicted is to call upon the elders of the community to pray for them and to anoint them with oil is in itself a further reminder that there is to be no distinction between rich and poor, for if oil is to be provided for such a purpose, the wealthier members will need to be the ones providing it for the poorer members would not be able to afford such oil on their own, save for the subsidy from those who are materially better off.

The writer stresses that one way to receive God's wholeness requires words, kind words, kind words of faith, that will include words of confession that are honest, and truthful; that reflect the reality of life rather masking past mistakes or present pains. Such truth-telling and confession is not punishment nor should we view it as an example of the sort of behavior perpetrated by some cults by means of which a leader can gain control over the lives and personalities of the vulnerable.

The “kind words” that are needed are to express and lead towards the wholeness offered from the very heart of God. The more open members of the Body can be with each other in sharing their stories, their sins, their needs, their hurts, the more readily and fully all the members of the Body will receive, express, share and offer the fullest experience of God’s love to and for all who most need God’s wholeness.

The sort of kind words that are to be shared, spoken and heard are always to be truth-filled and truthful words, both as they are spoken and heard. Right here is a huge point of connection between what we read in James and what we heard in the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus urges the use of such kind words as the way of reconciliation between the Church and one of its own whom has become distracted and disaffected in some way or another by their own sin. To work towards wholeness and reconciliation within the church requires conversation, open, candid conversation one on one; or one with a small group; or in the last resort between one and the entire church if that is what is needed for reconciliation to occur. These instructions from Jesus and the writer of the Letter of James call us to not merely affirm some sort of remote, theological or metaphysical truth about God. Much more is needed than this, individually and collectively the Church is expected to offer, receive and fully practice the gospel of renewing and transforming grace such that the lives of people will be fully and forever changed by the experience of openly and fully sharing the grace and goodness of God. As John reminded us in his sermon last week, God does not just ask us to all get along – God calls us forwards to wholeness and healing and restoration and salvation!

According to the Letter of James there are three spiritual practices that are key in helping us towards God’s wholeness - confession, intercession and the role of the entire community as a community of wholeness and healing. These practices involve us putting our faith into action express the desire that God has for all people to experience wholeness and these practices open the way for us to experience God’s wholeness.

In confession all within the church acknowledge and admit that we are all in the same place, that we all need God’s forgiveness that none of us are any better or any worse than anyone else in the church when it comes to how sin divides us from God and from each other. Over the years of my ministry I recall one man, an older gentleman, who knew great illness and struggle in his own life who would write to me from time to time complaining about some of the wording in certain Prayers of Confession that were used in worship. He would insist, sometimes very stubbornly, and forthrightly that some of the things he was being asked to admit to, he had never done. Of course, I thanked him for his attention to detail and his interest in our use of language but I always encouraged him to see such prayers as helping remind all of us, including him, that we need God, that we need to admit our need of God, that we need to openly acknowledge that on our own, we are lost, save for the mercy of God. Even if some phrase or set of words might go somewhat beyond what we may have ever done or said, or at least beyond what we remember of what we thought we did or said, such confession helps us acknowledge that our only hope is to be found in the welcoming arms of our loving, forgiving, righteous God; the God who alone can remove our sin and its consequences from our lives.

I do believe that the more open we can be when it comes to confessing our sin one to the other, the deeper will be our real and lasting fellowship as the Church of Jesus Christ. There is no community that believes more in the reality of sin and in the reality of God’s forgiveness than the Church of Jesus Christ. As any one of confesses to God and to the community, the rest of us should not be counting up all the commandments that have been broken nor should we be thinking about all the people whom we will

enjoy telling what they missed nor estimating the number of facebook posts it will take for us to put our spin on the whole matter! Instead our calling is to mediate and assure and re-assure the one doing the confessing, that God is always able to hear and forgive, fully and completely, coming to see us only as we look like as we are in Jesus Christ – loved by God, welcomed and received, blessed and restored. For sure there are historic and cultural norms that very much prevent us from engaging most fully in such open confession. Most of us have not grown up to be so open to one another. We have very few helpful models that might show us the way forward. Most of us did not grow up in a tradition in which we even confessed our sins to a priest. Regrettably we Presbyterians too often prefer our individualism and self-sufficiency but just maybe if we will confess more openly and fully we will be drawn to a greater openness with God and so come to experience and value a fuller, richer experience of the wholeness that God desires for us all.

The second spiritual practice required for the ministry of wholeness is intercession. Intercession is, like confession, something that we already do as part of our faith response. Each Sunday as the Body gathers to worship God, we expect to confess our need for God **and** we expect to pray for other people, for the needs of people other than ourselves. To intercede for the need or needs of another or others, sparks in us the awareness, that it is God's help that they **and** we need, and that we have responsibilities towards our neighbors. As we ask God to be faithful as God has promised to that other person or situation we should be open to how God will intervene in our lives. To pray for someone is not to engage in wishful thinking, nor to bribe God into a course of action, but to hold that person or situation in the very presence of God such that God can re-order and re-shape what is happening, towards the wholeness that God has for us all.

By means of confession, more open and full, by means of intercession, faithful and prayerful, God purposes to have us involved in and experience what it means to be a community of healing. By healing we never mean what we see from the hucksters on TV with their vain and empty gimmicks that only diminish and obscure the true wholeness and healing which God offers for all of us, and for all people. The one source of healing is God, not a dramatic preacher, not a prayer scarf free with a \$10 donation, not a set of words or some sort of emotional outburst, but God is the healer of every ill. Every aspect of our coming together, our being together, our worshipping and serving together invites us and constitutes us to be a church that is a community of healing. How we agree together and how we learn to disagree reflects our being community.

As one way for us to express our trust in the God who desires for all to discover wholeness and as one way we can share what we are discovering of God with one another, the Session has approved the upcoming Service of Wholeness and Healing set for September 18 at 5:00 p.m. here in the Sanctuary. In that special time we will be seek to be yet more fully focused on what it means for us to be in community together as we confess our need for God, as we intercede for others, with prayer including the practice encouraged in James for prayer with the laying on of hands by leaders of our church community. In all these ways we will anticipate, seek and welcome the promise of God's wholeness for God's world and people.

Through this Service of Wholeness and Healing we will witness to what it means for us to be united in our need for God's involvement and presence in our lives; we will express our desire to be called forward to trusting relationships within the Body of Christ and we will pray for and engage with and for each other in prayer. We will do so not as an alternative to all the benefits of medical science and care but recognizing that such gifts are also God's gifts and means by which God offers wholeness

The rising from the dead of Jesus Christ is the ultimate healing promise, assuring us that in life and death we belong to God. The ministry of healing as I have been attempting to outline it today can include physical healing, but the prayers of the church can also lead to a discovery of a deeper, more profound emotional and spiritual wholeness, a healing within families and relationships, the letting go of a grudge, openness to a new beginning.

Over the next two weeks as we prepare for the Service of Wholeness and Healing on September 18, please pray for all who need God's help; read or re-read some of the materials provided in recent editions of the Oakleaf describing what this ministry is and isn't; and above all else pray that you and all of us might discover in this particular lens of our shared ministry a deeper experience of the wild, extravagant, reconciling love of God, so needed in this world, so needed in your life and mine, if we only admit it and so needed in the lives of all those around us.

The ministry of Wholeness and Healing is a central and essential part of Being community. Being Community in the church of Jesus Christ is not an optional extra for us, it is our calling. Being community is not just about being together in the good days when everything is sweetness and light, being community applies equally and all the more when we face difficulties, conflict or tragedy. Being community is the Presbyterian, the Christian way, the Jesus way. Being community in worship, being community in fellowship, being community in service to and with others, being community as an expression of our faith in the God who is community – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Being community that all might discover the wholeness and healing that God has for all. Amen.