

**Sermon Notes – February 4, 2018**  
**“Healing”**  
**Brian Walton**

Let's call him Joe. Joe is an Indigenous man who lives on a nearby First Nation. Joe is a husband, father and grandfather of many. Joe is an Elder in his community where he has lived, off and on, for his whole life. He was gifted with a sweat lodge and with the songs, prayers and medicines for ceremony. Every Saturday morning he conducts a sweat for members of his community and for other Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who wish to participate. He normally tells some of his own story. It is a story of separation from his family as a child taken to residential school. It is a story of abuse at the hands of an uncle. It is the story of addiction and incarceration from his mid-teens to his early thirties. It is a story of meeting an Elder, learning about the culture and training as an oskapewis (helper) until – eventually - he was gifted the songs and the sweat lodge.

Joe has diabetes, like so many of his people. He was diagnosed in his late forties with Type II diabetes and immediately placed on a regime of insulin injections. It worked – kind of – for a while. At fifty, circulation had become a problem, his foot was infected and at 51 he had an amputation. Joe is resilient. He negotiated on crutches when a prosthetic didn't seem to work. At fifty-six he is back in the hospital and his remaining foot is infected.

My student had undoubtedly read the chapters in the gospel of Mark in which Jesus casts out demons, ministers to the sick and cures leprosy. My student, a Roman Catholic priest, will, when requested, administer the medicine of his tradition. Joe, like so many Indigenous persons, is bi-spiritual – he is invested in his own traditions while retaining respect and

belief for the Roman Catholic faith he was schooled in. Although Joe is not in immediate danger of dying, the priest offers him the sacrament of the sick. Once known as last rites, the sacrament has been re-interpreted as a blessing for anyone facing life-threatening illness. It is as close to a cure that my priest-student can perform. He wishes that, like Jesus, he could cure through touch or accomplish recovery through prayer but that just doesn't seem to work like it did in Mark's gospel. Of course, my priest-student isn't Jesus. Of course, Jesus' cures happened a long time ago. Of course, it may be impossible to understand these cures outside of their original Jewish culture. Of course, the gospel writers might have embellished their stories, to convince us of the divinity of Jesus. Yet, when I re-read Mark's story carefully, I begin to think that we can still heal. My priest-student can, even now, be engaged in acts of healing. You and I, like Jesus, can be agents of healing.

As Mark develops the story of Jesus, after baptism and the call of his disciples, the very first activity that he has Jesus engage in are acts of healing. In the verses that precede this morning's passage Jesus heals a man possessed by a demon (should we read mental illness?) In the story immediately after this morning's passage Jesus heals a man suffering with leprosy. In this morning's passage Jesus' healing seems a little more domestic in that he heals Peter's mother from a persistent fever, lifting her up from her sick bed. Did I suggest that we could heal like Jesus? Are we able to cast out the demon of bi-polar illness? Are we able to restore the decaying skin of a leper? Could I have spared my wife the persistent flu-driven fever that she suffered from this past week?

You may be intrigued by my turns of phrase but your logical mind is answering "no" – no, bi-polar illness needs medication, not prayer; leprosy

responds to a multi-drug therapy not healing touch; my wife needed a few days of rest, not theological musings from her husband. So - do we turn away from Mark's gospel with disbelief or simply relegate Jesus' healings to the one-time work of an incarnate God? Perhaps - yet - some scholars challenge us to look more thoroughly at Jesus actions as both healings and cures. Although we may not be able to exact cures, we might still bring about healing. In fact, some scholars suggest that if we are followers of the way of Jesus, we must be about healing.

To understand this we have to enter the society of first century Israel. We know that Israel was occupied by a foreign power. Israel was, essentially, a colony of Rome. The Jews were living amidst an occupier, much as the French did during the Nazi invasion of World War II. Power was a scarce commodity for the Jews in that circumstance. Those in the religious aristocracy, the Pharisees, Temple Priests and scribes, were intent on securing their power and one group they maintained power over were the sick and infirm. The religious establishment decided who was well and allowed into the temple, and who was unwell, and kept on the margins of society. The demon possessed and the lepers were kept at a distance often forced to live in isolation. Peter's mother was subject to another group of second class citizens, namely women, and this second-class status was exacerbated by her being a sick woman.

Somehow Jesus cured their individual ailments but more importantly he healed them by bringing them into a community of acceptance. To the extent that a movement was growing around him, his willingness to interact with the sick, to engage them in conversation, to touch them, to eat in their homes represented inclusion. No longer were they outcast, they were now part of the circle that followed him. No longer were they defined by their

illness, they were welcomed as full members of his community. No longer were they subject to the religious elite, instead they found acceptance in this peculiar messiah. His healing had made them whole. If this liberation of the marginalized, if this shift in the power differential, was not at the root of Jesus' healing than why was the powerful religious establishment so intent on discrediting him? Within two chapters they are calling him the 'devil'; within fifteen chapters they are crucifying him!

Joe, the Indigenous Elder, is still waiting to be cured **and** to be healed. It is his hope that the sores on his foot can be treated, that his blood sugar levels can be wrestled back with appropriate insulin and, for the time being at least, that his limb can be cured. Healing will take much longer. Like the infirm of Israel, Joe is near the bottom of our culture, forced to the margins of reserve life. His health and medical concerns are the result of the colonization of his people. Shoved on to reserves and into a forced idleness; changed diets away from the resources of the land toward the carbohydrate laden calories of cheap food, robbed of spirituality and personhood through systemic forces such as residential schools, escaping from the psychic pain into alcohol and drug use – this is the starting point for Joe and his peoples' health problems. Healing is so much more than a dose of insulin. Indigenous persons comprise less than 4% of the Canadian population but represent 7% of AIDS diagnosis, 18% of depression, 27% of addictions, have five times the average likelihood of living with diabetes, are three times more likely to commit suicide and die on average seven years earlier than other Canadians.

Health researchers are eager to talk about the determinants of health – those factors that influence how healthy we are. In this **slide <show health determinants slide and leave to end of sermon>** we see that things

like good housing, good jobs, good food and supportive community increase the likelihood of being healthy. I have to admit that in returning to St. Martin's almost 15 years after I left, one of my biggest surprises is how many of you continue to live with vitality and keen intellect into your eighties and nineties. Perhaps I should not be surprised – this congregation tends to be populated by people like me who have benefitted from good food, good housing and good education. The church itself is a healthy place for social support.

Wander, as I did for the last decade, around the area bordering St. Paul's Hospital and look at the housing. Talk to the community school teachers about the transience in their classrooms. Stand in the west side super store and see what kind of products a \$200/month food budget can provide. While people we know long for quicker hip replacements and knee surgeries, a whole population of people are waiting to be healed. As the relatively new upstream movement suggests we have to engage health long before cures are needed. We have to create a society where clean water, safe housing and adequate vegetables are available to all.

Those of us choosing to follow the way of Jesus might just be able to be healers after all. Like Jesus we have to be ready to point out the factors that make people sick. Social "will" followed by tax dollars do heal when directed toward needle exchange sites, free condoms, increased welfare rates, a living minimum wage, more social housing, a reduction in unemployment and genuine efforts at Reconciliation. These are prescriptions for health, actions like these will exorcise the demons that make our neighbours sick. We can read Mark's story about Jesus healing with skepticism. Or, we can read it and hope that in our own time of sickness prayer and faith might heal, or at least comfort us. Or we can see

that the radical love of Jesus wants to heal all people by challenging the demons that make and keep people sick. If God is the power of Love, and Jesus is our example, then we too can be healers as we work to transform our world into a common-wealth for all. Come Holy Spirit and motivate our action, we pray. Amen.