

Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
Larkspur, California  
June 23, 2013

Psalm 42; Luke 8:26-39  
"Healing"

Many years ago I read a book by a Disciples of Christ pastor, Don Basham, called, *Deliver Us from Evil: A Pastor's Reluctant Encounters with the Powers of Darkness*. It's today's gospel story updated to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Amazon describes the book in this way: "The idea of demons or demon possession was, to pastor Don Basham, far-fetched. But when members of his congregation started revealing problems that were strangely unresponsive to traditional Christian answers, he was forced to take a closer look.

*"Deliver Us from Evil* is the captivating account of Don Basham's journey from disbelief in the existence of demons to acceptance of their reality. This is more than a good detective story and more than the triumphant testimonies of ordinary people released from evil spirits. It is a compendium of Bible teaching on warfare and evil spirits, as well as the biblical conditions for deliverance, how to pray for deliverance, and how to protect oneself against demonic invasion. Deliverance is more than freedom from evil; it is delivery into the freedom to love and serve the Lord."

I was amazed to see a number of reviews on this same Amazon page that lauded the book. The book had an enormous impact on me at the time. It is honest and sincere. Basham enters this world skeptically and emerges convinced about the power of darkness and its possession of human beings. People are bound by demons and his was a ministry to release them from bondage.

That's about as much as I remember and as I grow in my thinking – theologically and scientifically – I still don't deny the realities of this book. I have an open mind on the subject. You can read the book and make your own judgments.

I've always regarded myself as a balanced Christian and I went into seminary 32 years ago with this balance and Basham and other Christian perspectives in my back pocket. I emerged from seminary with more perspectives.

As radical as Basham was from a conventional stand point, I experienced another radical reality when I was a chaplain intern at UCSF, San Francisco's center of health sciences research, patient care, and education, widely regarded as one of the world's leading universities in health sciences.

I was fortunate to be selected as one of 12 student chaplain interns in the summer of 1984 and we were assigned to different floors. I spent three months in the Cardiac Care Unit and Cardiology and in a new wing on my floor treating the first HIV/AIDS patients.

I was surprised to learn that no students were assigned to the psychiatric unit because the hospital had past negative experiences with chaplains and visiting pastors trying to deliver evil spirits or demons from their patients. They interfered with the legitimate healing methods of the medical profession.

The more we delve into mental health the more we know the multiple reasons for a human being's physical and psychological health. I needn't spell out in our day the multiple causes for a person's compromised mental health.

For those who have dwelt in depression's dark wood have known its inexplicable agony. Whoever has been restored to health has almost always been restored to the capacity for serenity and joy, and this may be indemnity enough for having endured despair beyond despair.

There are psychological imbalances experienced by veterans of wars given the traumas they endure. We wouldn't attribute their ailments to demon-possession although we might describe war as hell.

Given this I am pleased with the definition for healing given in Wikipedia. It states:

"Healing (literally meaning *to make whole*) is the process of the restoration of health to an unbalanced, diseased or damaged organism. Healing may be physical or psychological and not without the mutual reception of these two dimensions of human health.

"With respect to physical damage or disease suffered by an organism, healing involves the repair of living tissue, organs and the biological system as a whole and resumption of normal functioning...

"In psychiatry and psychology, healing is the process by which neuroses and psychoses are resolved to the degree that the client is able to lead a

normal or fulfilling existence without being overwhelmed by psychopathological phenomena.

“This process may involve psychotherapy, pharmaceutical treatment and increasingly traditional spiritual approaches.”

I’m happy that this conventional definition includes spiritual approaches. Many hospitals today appreciate and affirm the spiritual benefits of whole health healing and I must say that UCSF appreciated this in every other department. They had their own whole health healing practitioners on staff and they included student chaplains in the weekly nursing meetings. We even had access to patient records.

As a pastor now for 28 years I have valued the lessons of my chaplaincy and have visited psychiatric wards a number of times and I tread wearily and am sensitive and respectful of the medical care given there *and* I incorporate spiritual components such as listening with compassionate Christ-like ears (which feels the pain and offers faith and hope) and prayers for healing. Healing is comprehensive and it emerges from a presence in the fullest medical and spiritual way with a person. I don’t try to deliver patients from demons.

Don Basham’s book is far behind me but you can appreciate how I bring him to mind when I read the gospel story as presented today. The lectionary chose the passage and therefore it encourages me to look at the subject again and to say something about it.

With the aforementioned context, I shall now take a closer look at the passage itself.

First, it gives us an appreciation of how badly affected a human being can be in poor mental health. It arouses empathy and deep concern, not only for the person affected but for the surrounding family and community. Imagine the pain of the so-called “Gerasene Demoniac” in the gospel story.

The scripture states: “For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs... many times (the unclean spirit) had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.”

That a human being could suffer so is unbelievable. It is to this person that Jesus comes as healer and does so by confronting the spirits that are binding the person. These are the stories that give some pastors permission to see demons in every case of ill mental health. They take

the gospel story at face value. It's not my place to deny what Jesus does here.

The second dimension is the unusual aspect of sending the legion of demons into pigs that run headlong off the cliff to their death. This sends the herders to flee to the city and country and tell what happened. The people run to the scene and see the mentally ill person totally healed but they are filled with fear and they tell Jesus to leave.

It is said that the pigs were provision for the occupying Roman forcers and this wholesale death of their supply puts fear into the local suppliers. Jesus upset this economic arrangement and that's why they asked him to leave. It is not stated whether the people appreciated the fact that the man was healed. There are various interpretations on this which I won't go into now but please ask me if you like after the service.

The important thing is that Jesus had a powerful healing ministry and here he healed a man so sorely in need of healing. As we walk in the footsteps of Jesus we are called to be healers and we can do so in many ways. Any reaching out to another with care, concern and compassion is to participate in the healing ministry of Jesus – and we can do so in the most sophisticated UCSF way or by holding the hand of someone in hospital or by praying for each other which we do every Sunday and during the week.

Finally, Jesus tells the healed man: "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." The text concludes: "So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him." Jesus calls the man to be an evangelist, to tell the good news of his encounter with Jesus which brings us to the place where we admit that we too have been healed in some way in our relationship to God in Jesus Christ and so we too are encouraged to go out and tell how much Jesus has done for us.

This is "caring evangelism." It begins with listening and when the opportunity arises we can share how Jesus healed and heals us and if the way be clear with the loving work of the Holy Spirit the person listened to might be open to that same healing because after all that's what Jesus is about in today's gospel story and that is what we are about in our walk of faith. We are called to be healers. We are called to be proclaimers of God's good news in Jesus Christ. Amen.