

We heard two passages from the gospel of John today. Just now we heard the prayer of Jesus for his disciples shortly before he died. He prayed for their well-being and faithfulness, and that they would know God so well that they could be safe from evil and able to carry out God's will in the world. It was a prayer for his followers then and a prayer for Christians even to this day. Jesus prayed that his followers would even in tough times remember their identity so that their purpose would give them strength as they faced a hostile, frightening world.

This prayer was not some lofty, disconnected holy mumbling somewhere. It was Jesus' heartfelt prayer for his friends, persons he loved. It was a prayer for all he had lived for, and for all he would die for.

It may help us understand Jesus' prayer if we consider another person's prayer. A relatively young mother with a terminal illness said to her pastor, "I'm so afraid. Not for myself. I don't think I fear death. But I am afraid for my children. I hate to leave them alone in this world. How can I protect them? How can I make sure they are loved? How can I bear the thought of leaving them?" She prayed for them.

How would we pray for those left in today's world? How do we pray for our children? That they grow wise and strong? That they gain many friends and become powerful and wealthy? That they be spared suffering, illness, failure, and conflict? That they become well-married and well-employed. Jesus prayed for his disciples' relationship with God and their sense of purpose with God. This alone could give them strength for whatever life in the world threw at them. (pause)

Life seems to be a great pitcher when it comes to hard stuff hitting people. Nepal, with yet another 7+ earth-shake this pastweek. All those immigrants trying to escape their desperate lives, paying thousands of dollars per person to get on a raft or boat, trying to find a place to have a chance at life...but nobody wants them, because the nearby countries are already overwhelmed by the huge numbers of people pouring into their lands. We watch from a long distance here in the USA, and perhaps wonder what will happen if the boatloads of refugees end up here, to become our challenges. Life can hit hard.

A terrible train wreck took place this week, which led to just about everybody saying that if the Positive Train Control system had been in place on that curve in Philadelphia, the disaster would have been prevented, no matter what happened to the engineer. So everybody is abuzz about the need for our nation to get serious about our aging, fragile, and largely outdated infrastructure. But the thing is: If we ARE serious about fixing things, we are going to have to spend money to do so, which will likely mean an increase in our taxes... Do we really want to be healed?

Over the last few months there have been several deeply disturbing incidences of police officers using deadly force against unarmed black males. We shake our heads and in some of the cases cannot believe what has transpired. We are forced to acknowledge that there seems to be much more police activity against people of color, especially men, than against whites. This ought to be

changed, and lots of people think so. But are we really willing to work on things and perhaps spend more money on inner city job training; do we want to work towards letting our society be healed of its racism?

In our own families some of us carry hurt feelings or painful histories with each other; there may be grudges or family members who are simply avoided. To sort things out takes a lot of energy and a real willingness to sit down and listen to the other person. Too often a rift in a family is simply swept under some sort of family rug, padding the pain and keeping further communication from being very honest. Are we willing to risk ourselves and to be vulnerable to the other person so that there can be a chance of healing?

The first lesson from the Gospel of John was the familiar story of the man who had waited by the pool at Bethesda/Bethsaida for some thirty-eight years, hoping to be healed. Jesus asked him a strange question: "Do you want to be healed?" The man quickly explained why he had not already been aided by the healing waters: "Nobody has been available to get me into the water when the waters moved with their healing powers." Jesus told the man, "Arise, take up your bed, and walk." And the man did.

This story seems to have a message for just about everybody. The question, "Do you want to be healed?" can be a real challenge. A woman complains of her emphysema, but won't give up smoking. Millions of Americans worry about our weight, and spend billions of dollars to get rid of it, but all too often we are unwilling to do the hard things to slim down: cut the calories and increase the exercise. Do we really want to be healed? We grumble about our hectic schedules, but will we make changes? We fill our medicine cabinets with "remedies," all kinds of things to compensate for various over-indulgences, but do we really want to be healed of the anxieties that are pushing us to fill our lives with "junk"? Most of the time, we don't want to be healed. We're basically comfortable with our unease and displeasures. There is a cost to being healed. What most of us really want is not to be healed, but to become more comfortable with our brokenness.

Jesus asked the man if he really wanted to be healed, and the man came up with an excuse for not having been healed: "Nobody was here to help me." This is an important part of the story. For it is too easy to blame others for our own lack of healing or life. "There's nothing I can do, there is no one to help me, nobody cares about my situation, nobody understands me, that's just the way things are." "Poor me"; reminds me of Eeyore in Winnie the Pooh. Some people really do not want to be made whole. An afflicted person has a built-in excuse; a healed person has had to let go of illness or whatever has dampened life so as to embrace something new.

"Do you want to be healed?" We may have experienced "Bethsaida" situations. We may not have physical impairments keeping us from life, but there are many other kinds, more subtle: Grudges, negative attitudes, fear of failure, self-doubt, fear of life or death, flaring tempers, discouragement over a family situation, addiction to drugs or alcohol or gambling... They may have been part of our lives for 38 years, or more. We may feel that there is nothing we can do to have better life. If so, the question we need to hear is: "Do you think God has any power over your situation, and if so, do you think God wants you to be healed of what is robbing you of life and joy?"

Unfortunately, too many of us do doubt God's desire to make us well. The song, "There is a balm in Gilead" promises that God can and will heal the sin-sick soul. But somehow the truth of this, even though it is proclaimed all throughout the Bible, too often gets lost for the person sitting in the church pew.

Years ago the great preacher E. Stanley Jones told of a little girl who came to church with a broken doll in her hands. The church had a mourner's bench in the front for the old revival meetings, and there, through the experience of mourning and weeping, people would find release and victory and forgiveness. The little girl with the broken doll came forward to the pastor and asked: "Is this the place where they mend broken hearts?"

A good question! *Is this a place where broken hearts can be healed? Is this a place where the love of God can saturate a broken relationship and offer forgiveness? Is this a place where despair is not ignored or overlooked, but led forward to hope? Is this a place where people can dare to be healed?* If we are of God, then the answer ought to be YES, every time! Yes, because we are connected to the great Specialist in Human Brokenness! Yes, because the Author of love and forgiveness is our charter! Yes, because the true Balm of Gilead is our Lord!

But wait a minute. God could heal people here, or anywhere, because God is God. But our congregation, look at us. We are tired, we don't have so many members any more, and we are not very wealthy. We have spent years learning not to expect too much, and we really don't, can't. We are a frail congregation, perhaps not waiting to be healed so much as to be gently laid to rest... Were Jesus to come in here today in a recognizable way and look at us and ask, "Do you want to be healed as a congregation?" how would we respond? I can hear myself saying, "Sure Lord, but you know that the Pew report just came out with the news that fewer and fewer Americans are claiming to be Christian; and you know we don't have enough money for our roof, and you know that there's a huge burden already pressing on the shoulders of too few here... What do you mean by 'being healed' for us, Lord?"

"Being healed" as a congregation seems to lead us back to Jesus' prayer for his disciples. "Holy Father, keep those you have given me true to your name so that they may be one like us. ... Consecrate them in the truth... As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world... I pray not only for these, but for those also who through their words will believe in me."

The late Baptist preacher, Clarence Cranford, came across a Mother's Day card one year that may help illustrate for us. On the card was a picture of a caterpillar crawling along one end of a branch, while poised on the other end was a gorgeous butterfly. The caterpillar said to the butterfly, "Mother, you're beautiful." Cranford went on to expound: "How little the caterpillar realizes that in God's plan for its life there is the latent possibility of a similar transformation; that by surrendering its worm-likeness to the protective embrace of a silken cocoon, it too can emerge as a glorious creature of beauty and flight."

"There is a similar possibility in each one of us. Earthbound though we are, we can be born again into a spiritual beauty and freedom. As the Bible puts it, we can 'put on' Christ, so that the ugliness

of our sin is taken away, and people can begin to see something of the beauty of Jesus in us."

"This possibility helps us to love others in a new way. A caterpillar wantonly destroys the foliage on which it feeds, but a butterfly in no way harms the flowers from which it draws its sustenance. On the contrary, it carries pollen from flower to flower and so contributes to new growth and beauty. Many people feed their desires and ambitions at the expense of others. A sincere Christian, on the other hand, not only seeks to receive God's love but also tries to carry some of that love to other persons. ..." (Clarence Cranford, *Cups of Light*)

Cranford's image of the caterpillar and the butterfly fits pretty well with Jesus' prayer for us, that we would be in the world but not of the world... Butterflies by the grace of God. And the choice for healing is actually the same thing. Yes, I want to be healed. Yes, I want the fullness of life only God can provide. Yes, I want to live in love and joy, with purpose!

We pray and hope for our children. In our deepest love, we pray for their fulfillment and joy. God yearns for no less for each one of us, God's children. Are we willing to be made whole?

Let us pray: Dear God, we are often paralyzed in our faith. Please help us to see where our lives are blocked from receiving your love, and give us the courage to allow your healing work in these areas. May we be your effective servants in this world, but may we never forget that our true home is forever in your kingdom. Amen.