



“Healed”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Luke 5: 27-32; Romans 11: 1-6

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I want you to try to picture something for me.

- I want you to imagine an auto repair shop – wherever it is you take your cars for service – but I want you to picture the lot filled with nothing but brand new cars in pristine condition. Off in the corner there’s a group of mechanics playing poker around a table with nothing to fix.
- I want you to picture walking into your dry cleaner with the same clothes you picked up the day before – spotless, still hanging on the same hangers and draped in that same plastic sheathing – all to be cleaned once again.
- I want you to imagine a hospital, an emergency room, filled with people left and right in perfect health – a bunch of 20-something fitness instructors without a physical care in the world. I want you to try to picture the doctors and nurses wandering around, aimlessly, with nothing to do and no one to care for.

Now, as absurd as all of that is, I want you to hold on to those concepts – that sheer sense of disconnect between the purpose of the place and the reality of its usage – as I suggest that that is exactly what, in so many ways, we’ve done to the church!

I liken it to that youthful rite of passage of growing tall enough for those big rides at your favorite theme park. Particularly for those of us in the more ‘vertically challenged’ portion of society, there is a stage of childhood in which we really wanted to try that one roller coaster, but just couldn’t quite get the top of our heads above that clearly delineated line between who was in and who was out. Month after month – sometimes year after year – we’d measure ourselves at home, we’d pray for that extra ½” we needed, and we would wait with tremendous anxiety for that moment in which we would finally reach that pinnacle of opportunity towards we had been striving for so long.

Somewhere along the way, that is what we’ve done to faith. Somewhat consciously, but I think even more so subconsciously, we’ve turned faith into something we strive to measure up to. We’ve turned faith into something we achieve. We’ve turned our relationship with God into a meritorious act of discipleship and not the pure gift of God’s abundant grace taking hold in our lives that it actually is. “Those who are well have no need of a physician,” Jesus says, “but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.” Somewhere along

the way we've turned faith into an accomplishment and not a gift, and we've turned the church into a sanctuary for the saints and not the infirmary for the broken that it was meant to be.

Now, all of that is problematic enough on its own. That longing to measure up to that delineated height requirement reaches an interesting point, however as one gets close – as some decide to start trying some of those little tricks to get that last little bit that is needed. We spike up our hair in hopes that they don't press it down when they check our height. We choose those shoes with that extra little bit of lift just to try to get above that line. I've watched parents fold pieces of cloth into the soles of their children's shoes in an attempt to try to literally lift them up enough to ride that ride. In other words, so anxious to be in, we literally find ways to pretend that we measure up, even when don't!

That, I fear, is what we've done to faith. Somewhere along the way we've turned faith into an accomplishment and not a gift, and we've turned the church into a sanctuary for the saints and not the infirmary for the broken that it was meant to be. And, we have done all of this to such an extent that we will literally find ways to pretend that we measure up to that false standard, despite the fact that not one of us actually does!

The first phrase that jumped to my mind as I was considering this message was the term 'bootstrapping.' I think we all can picture the origin image of the term – the literal notion of bending over, grabbing your bootstraps, and lifting yourself up. An impossible task, and a phrase that was originally used to reflect that reality – that some things are impossible to do on one's own. What I found fascinating as I looked at the term, however, is that many current uses of the same phrase take the exact opposite tone. As opposed to pointing us in the direction of the reality that we cannot accomplish all on our own, 'bootstrapping' is now a celebrated characteristic of the modern-day American. What was once intended to highlight our need for the help of another is now used to celebrate one's independent capacity to do the difficult on one's own. We took a term meant to highlight our dependence and turned it into a celebration of individual strength and accomplishment.

That's where our society is. That's where our cultural mindset has landed. And yes, in many ways, that very mindset has made its way into the life of the Church and into the practice of our faith. The challenge, however, is that this is, in every way, the antithesis of what our faith is meant to be. And, this very concept rips away, from us, the hope and possibility that God's grace and love breathes into our lives.

“So too at the present time there is a remnant,” Paul writes, “chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.” Paul is writing here, as he often does in the letter to the Romans, about the tension between the Law of Moses and the New Covenant of Jesus. I don't want to get into the weeds of all of that today but, suffice it to say that Paul has a fundamental conviction that, while the theories and moralities of the Law were valid and imperative in the pursuit of faithful living, the manner in which they had come to serve as a 'litmus test' of faith flew directly into the face of the cross. The whole point of the passion narrative was to bring to light the unmerited gift of God's mercy, love and grace shown to us in Jesus. Paul has a fundamental conviction that, in the end, no one measures up – and all the Law does is highlight that truth. “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis

of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.” We aren’t saved by somehow trying to pretend that we measure up to the litmus test of the Law. It is in grace, and in grace alone, that we find our salvation.

For anyone who has been hearing the past few messages as we’ve come into Lent, this notion of not measuring up is nothing new. We talked about it last week when we discussed our shared imperfection that stands at the root of this sermon series, and Julie used the image of the potter and the clay as she put a beautiful frame around God re-forming our brokenness during her message on Ash Wednesday. My point, today, is not to, once again, heap more weight onto the pile of our human frailty, but to point to the reality that at the inception of this Lenten journey we not only need to see that we are imperfect, but we need to be willing to openly and honestly own that brokenness with ourselves, with God, and with one another.

Today’s particular theme was, ‘Not healthy, but being healed.’ The immediate thoughts that emerge from that theme are, of course, physical: our illnesses...our injuries...our bodily suffering. There is no question that the Gospel is rich with stories of Jesus bringing physical healing into the lives of his people, and there is no question that there is very real physical healing for which we long in our faith. Our lack of health, however – and thus our need for healing – goes so much deeper than that. Our relationships, our families, our habits, our addictions, our hearts, our spirits... Seeking God’s active healing in our lives goes so much deeper than lowering our cholesterol, and a lot of that (and so much more) will be a part of our continued exploration in the weeks ahead. God’s active healing in those place starts, however, with the core conviction of our faith that the Gospel is meant for our brokenness, that the cross was meant for hope, and that our relationship with God is not based on some measure of our health, but bathed in the incomparable hope of being healed.

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.” “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.” Somewhere along the way we’ve turned faith into an accomplishment and not a gift, and we’ve turned the church into a sanctuary for the saints and not the infirmary for the broken that it was meant to be. And, we have done all of this to an extent that we will literally find ways to pretend that we measure up to that false standard, despite the fact that not one of us actually does!

Hear, if you will, that quote from Brennan Manning. “My trust in God flows out of the experience of his loving me, day in and day out, whether the day is stormy or fair, whether I’m sick or in good health, whether I’m in a state of grace or disgrace. He comes to me where I live and loves me as I am.” The Gospel is meant for our brokenness. The cross was meant for hope. Our relationship with God is not based on some measure of our health, but bathed in the incomparable hope of being healed.

The ways we need that healing, and the manner in which it will come, will be so different from each of us to the next. As we seek it, however, in whatever form our lives call for it, we have to tamp down our spiked-up hair, we have to pull that cloth from the soles of our shoes, and we have to come before God as we are. We have to stop celebrating the bootstrapped American spirit of all that I can be and accomplish on my own, and we have to start rejoicing in the hope

and possibility that lie in the grace and love of that God who comes to us where we live and loves us as we are. We have to trust in the wonder and glory of the promise that the Gospel is meant for our brokenness. We have to embrace the promise that the cross was meant for hope. We have to stop trying to measure up and realize that, by way of the cross, the ruler doesn't even exist anymore. And we have to rejoice in the fundamental conviction of our faith that our relationship with God is not based on some measure of our health, but bathed in the incomparable hope of being healed.