

I. Advanced Organizer

A. **I want to start by telling you two brief stories from some of my own experiences in communities of faith.** Story 1:

1. The first was almost twenty years ago now, I was a twenty something young adult, helping chaperone a group of high school students that I worked with at a youth conference in England. It was a powerful trip, filled with lots of fun bonding experiences, amazing musical worship, and smart, engaging teachings. But then **came the night that the speakers wanted to talk about physical healing, and pray for people to be healed.** This made me feel a bit uneasy. It wasn't that I absolutely didn't believe it could happen. I'd heard lots of stories from people I considered trustworthy about God healing people in amazing supernatural ways. I'd even seen some things myself on occasion that seemed pretty encouraging, but **I hadn't witnessed a lot that I'd confidently call straight-up miraculous.** And I'd certainly had my share of praying for people and not seeing them experience any obvious change. I could manage my own expectations, but I was nervous about the students.
2. The speaker told some amazing stories about people he had seen miraculously healed. And **then he said we were going to practice praying for one another right then.** He had all the kids who had some sort of physical issue they'd like to see God bring healing to raise their hands. And all of the kids surrounding those people were instructed to lay hands on the kids in question. While there were certainly a lot of headaches and colds I'm sure that got prayed for, there was a girl in our group, I'll call Rachel, with a more serious condition. **She had chronic severe asthma;** so severe that she had to bring a machine with her on the trip to do breathing treatments each night before bed. Rachel also carried a little breath monitor with her at all times, that would somehow measure the strength of her lungs when she blew into it. She raised her hand for prayer and all the kids around her laid their hands on her and started to invite the Holy Spirit to come and touch her body.
3. After a bit of time, **it became apparent that something really significant was happening with Rachel.** She felt a weight on her that she didn't want to try to stand up under; soon she was lying down on the floor. She said she could feel something happening in her body, a strange warmth overcoming her chest. She said it was particularly intense when one young woman who was very new to the Jesus-thing put her hand on her chest and prayed for her. The praying girl also felt a strange warmth in her hand as she did. This went on for a little while, the students praying with more and more encouragement for increased healing for Rachel, and Rachel confirming that she believed she was experiencing real healing. Before long Rachel was giddy with laughter, jubilant that she had been healed. **She pulled out her breath monitor and blew into it.** The numbers were for her off the charts. They were in the normal range; a feat she'd never achieved before. The kids were all ecstatic, some of them putting real faith in Jesus for the first time. And when Rachel returned home, her nervous parents took her to her doctors, only to have them confirm that which they themselves couldn't explain: that after taking a trip to England, Rachel no longer suffered from asthma.

- B. **The second story involves a middle-age woman in a congregation I served at who found herself suffering greatly from back pain.** It had come on acutely and was immediately impeding her ability to function. After a few days, the pain was only growing more intense, requiring her to seek medical help. An MRI revealed that she had a herniated disc. The proposed treatment was surgery. Friends from the church, myself included, repeatedly laid hands on her and prayed for relief, but the pain persisted. So our community walked through the experience with this woman and her family of preparing for and going through back

surgery. Folks brought meals when the family needed them. They prayed for relief from fear and anxiety. They visited the woman after her surgery when she was recovering at home, bringing gifts, food, and listening ears. And slowly but surely, recovery did take place. Function was in good part restored, pain managed and relieved and the woman in question was cared for by her friends and church family all along the way.

C. So my question to you based on these two stories is: **which of these stories is a story of healing? Which of these two stories demonstrates God's healing power ministered to someone in need through a community of Jesus followers?** The answer, of course, is both. Both stories tell us about someone experiencing the healing touch of God in the context of a church. However, what is interesting is how differently we can tend to regard such stories.

1. **I came to an active, personal faith in a Vineyard church in college, and was amazed to find a place where people actually believed that God could and does still do the miraculous stuff of supernatural healing.** And as I shared, I've had my own rare experiences where it seemed like miraculous things have taken place. But I've also had lots and lots of experiences, that weren't like that.
2. **Where does the second story fit in a framework that defines healing as a supernatural dramatic event?** The woman with back pain did receive prayer, just as the young women with asthma did. I think they were prayed for with very similar techniques. And yet there was no divine drama in that story: at least not on the surface. Does that mean that God was not present in her healing? No, I don't believe that. Clearly this woman did receive healing. But **healing was a broader experience than having her symptoms instantaneously relieved.** It was a process which, even in the midst of walking through physical pain, brought her relational, spiritual, and emotional wholeness. And I believe that was a gift from the Divine.

D. **This Lent, we're in the middle of a series I'm calling, "Vulnerable Together" in which we're reflecting on the reality of our own human vulnerability.** As I shared two weeks ago, the word vulnerable comes from the word "wound". To be vulnerable means to be subject to wounding, to have the capacity for injury. Perhaps this is the most true thing we can say about the human condition: that it is vulnerable.

1. **None of us like to feel vulnerable.** It doesn't feel good to be wounded. It doesn't feel good to see others wounded. **We long for wellness, we long to fix what's broken.** And that impacts how we think about today, the subject of healing.
2. Even in this room, **when we talk about the subject of "healing" we will likely have folks coming from a number of different places of experience.** Some of our experiences may be like the stories I described – praying for people and maybe even seeing supernatural relief. Some might think there could be something to that mode of prayer, but have also been traumatized in charismatic evangelical settings that pray for healing, as someone prayed to have our gender identity or sexual orientation "healed". Others of us may feel pretty skeptical about supernatural healing altogether; skeptical of stories like mine (and I don't blame you for the record). Perhaps we are more accustomed to look at things from a more medical, scientific point of view. And there are folks in our community who are living with a chronic illness or a disability, or are close to a family member or friend who is. Some of these limitations are public and obvious. Many others are not as outwardly visible, but they all have an impact on our lives, and they all prompt the question for people of Jesus-centered faith, **"What does it mean to experience the healing presence of Jesus?"**

E. In seminary, I had the opportunity to take a class on spiritual issues pertaining to chronic illness and disability. One distinction I have found helpful in much of the work done by theologians and pastors who study the topic is **the distinction between *healing* and *cure*. *Cure*, they say, is recovery of function or elimination of physical symptoms. However, *healing* is a broader concept. It deals with the whole person, not merely the affected part of them. **Healing deals not just with the physical, but with the emotional, relational, mental, and spiritual state of a person.** Healing can, and often does include cure, whether it be through medical or supernatural means. **But what about the person who experiences no cure? Is God's healing not present in their life?** A broader view of healing recognizes that, as positive a thing as alleviating symptoms often is, **there is more involved than that in the ministry of healing.****

1. **John Naudé is a vicar, a priest in the Church of England.** He is the senior leader of his congregation, the Church of the Good Shepherd. He is married to his wife Belinda, and the two are parents to a son named Samuel. John Naudé is also one of the only clergy within the church of England to use a wheelchair full time.
2. When speaking at a conference in 2010 he shared the following: "Those of you with a disability know the experience of having people ask you, 'How long have you been suffering this disability?' My usual response for those people is '**I don't suffer from my disability. Rather, I suffer people like yourself.**'" This funny, but biting response highlights a reality that Naude, as well as many other people living with disability understand: **that their experience of having a disability is not merely physical, it is also social. And often it is the social challenges, rather than the physical limitations, that people living with illness or disability experience as the most difficult.** Naudé, and others like him, have spent years literally being looked down on, often treated as children, and excluded from meaningful participation in community life.
3. **Unfortunately, the discomfort and perceptions that surround people living with illness and disability are deeply culturally embedded and sometimes painful to acknowledge.** When you think about it, even the term "**dis-abled**" is **demeaning**. It emphasizes a lack of one certain ability rather than recognizing that the person in question has a variety of other abilities. To say someone is "disabled" or "handicapped" means to reduce their entire identity to their limitation. For this reason, **many disability advocates prefer to use terms such as "persons with disabilities" , "other-abled" or "differently abled" to remind the broader culture that all of us are people with our own strengths, abilities, and dignity.**

F. The issue of social barriers creating a "disabling" experience is not new, which brings us to the passage we'll be looking at this morning. In biblical times this was a very relevant issue. **Social stigma was related to religious practices that often required that a person with a disability must be excluded from the life and practice of faith.** Arguably, the condition that demonstrated this social stigma the most was that of leprosy.

II. (Jesus and the Man with Leprosy)

- A. (Setup) **To understand what made the stigma of leprosy so strong, we must understand a bit about religious life in ancient Israel.** So we're going to play a little imagination game. Imagine that you are an ancient Hebrew man or woman living in an encampment with the rest of your nation. Your people have been liberated from slavery, you've left Egypt, and are now en route to your promised land, but here you are camped for years – nomads in the desert as you travel and wait for God to lead you into your destiny. In the meantime, your entire culture is shaped by the laws and regulations Moses has given you on Mt. Sinai to live by. This is a

good thing, it's how your coming into relationship as a people, you're forming a corporate identity, and much of that corporate identity revolves around your observance of the precious Torah you've been given.

- B. However, **a number of these laws have to do with restrictions of purity, and fitness to participate in corporate life. They're intended to keep people safe and make clear what the identity of this unique group is.** But the effect of them is that they establish a system by which people are understood to be, at any given time, **"clean" or "unclean"**. To be clean means you can live in the camp; you can be with people, you can participate in corporate worship. However, to be unclean means you need to be removed from society, living outside of the camp until your state of uncleanness has expired.
1. **The reason that someone deemed unclean needs to be isolated, is that the very state of being unclean itself is highly contagious.** If a person who is ceremonially unclean comes into contact with a person who is ceremonially clean, that clean person will also become unclean. Sometimes that person can make others unclean, who can make others unclean. So contact with people who are unclean is to be totally avoided.
 2. **Folks are deemed unclean for a variety of reasons.** Some of these are sinful behaviors. Some of them are due to contact with various animals. Eating certain foods can make you unclean. And some are purely biological - a woman's monthly period, or for a woman or a man, the appearance of any kind of skin disorder, will cause one to be unclean for as long as it persists.
 3. There are rituals for re-entry into the community after a period of being unclean. For skin conditions, once your outbreak has resolved, you need to be inspected by a priest who can confirm that the condition is cured and can pronounce you ceremonially clean. **However, if you suffer from a skin disease for which there is no known cure, you will have to live on the margins indefinitely. Leprosy is such a disease.**
 4. If you contract leprosy **you will have to spend the rest of your life outside the camp.** Your body will deteriorate. At first you will see lesions appear on your skin, followed by nerve damage and loss of sensation in your hands and feet, which causes them to be easily injured. In addition to this physical suffering, you will need to be separated from your friends and family. If you ever come in close proximity of other people, **you will need to cover your mouth and then yell out "Unclean! Unclean!"** to everyone in your midst so they can make sure to stay away and not be contaminated by you. And that will be how you live the rest of your life until your condition deteriorates to the point that it eventually kills you.
- C. As you can imagine, **to contract leprosy in ancient Israel was akin to immediate social death.** By Jesus' time, centuries later, people living with leprosy were **literally called "the walking dead"**. It is in this world that Jesus finds himself when he encounters a man living with leprosy in the passage we're looking at today.
1. ***40 Now a leper came to him and fell to his knees, asking for help. "If you are willing, you can make me clean," he said. 41 Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing. Be clean!" 42 The leprosy left him at once, and he was clean. 43 Immediately Jesus sent the man away with a very strong warning. 44 He told him, "See that you do not say anything to anyone, but go, show yourself to a priest, and bring the offering that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." 45 But as the man went out he began to announce it publicly and spread the story widely, so that Jesus was no longer able to***

enter any town openly but stayed outside in remote places. Still they kept coming to him from everywhere. (Mark 1:40-45)

- D. This is a short story, but I think it's a really interesting one, because if we look beneath the surface, **we see Jesus heal this man with leprosy in multiple ways.** On the one hand, it is easy to focus on the supernatural element. **We see the miraculous cure** and are amazed, as well we should be. But by focusing on the eradication of the disease alone, we might miss something else that's very important. **This story is not just about the fact that Jesus cured the man with leprosy. It's also about how and why he did it.**
- E. **The man with leprosy was unique in his approach.** He gave Jesus a choice rather than simply requesting a healing. He knew that for him to even be in a town where Jesus was, amongst the community and the people gathering around Jesus, was forbidden. He also knew that **physical contact with Jesus would make Jesus ceremonially unclean.** So the man beseeched him. He bowed before him and begged him, but he acknowledged the risk to Jesus by giving him a choice, "If you are willing, You can make me clean."
1. What must Jesus have been thinking in that moment? He was an observant Jew who knew his torah backwards and forwards; he was aware of the social taboo around this man and the danger to himself of being contaminated by contact with him. So what was going on in his mind? Was he nervous? Frustrated at this stranger's gall?
 2. **The text says Jesus was moved with compassion.** Other translations say this differently. "Jesus was indignant" or "angry". It's a bit confusing. The actual image in the original Greek is of **Jesus being moved so deeply that he feels it in his gut, literally in his bowels.** It's as if a mix of compassion and righteous anger from deep within overcome him and he is moved to respond. And this is where Jesus does the most remarkable thing which would be completely shocking to the people of his day. **He reaches out his hand, and touches the man with leprosy in front of him.**
 3. There are other healings that Jesus does that are hands-off. Sometimes he merely speaks a word and someone is healed. Jesus could have done that here. But instead, he chooses to stretch out his hand and touch the man, making himself ritually unclean. So why? Why does he do it? Why take that risk?
 4. Personally, **I don't think Jesus is just being careless here. I think he's being really intentional.** This is a man who probably hasn't been touched by another human being in years. He has been kept at arms' length for as long as he has been unclean. And in a moment, Jesus breaks the invisible barrier that has surrounded him, that wall of absent space that has been his cage of isolation, and with his own hands, Jesus tenderly touches him.
 5. **The miracle of Jesus in this moment is two-fold. Firstly, it is purely a miracle that when Jesus touches this man, his incurable condition is cured.** The lesions on his skin vanish. **But more than skin has been healed in that moment. A person has been healed.** Not only is this man relieved of his physical discomfort but **his very person-hood has been restored.** No longer is he "the walking dead". What was dead has been resurrected. He has been given an opportunity to relate to others, to touch them, and to be touched, to live a real life once again.
 6. I believe Jesus looked in his eyes, he heard his voice, and he understood that **what tortured this man wasn't at its core the condition of his skin.** Yes, the skin condition was likely painful at times, distressing to be sure. But **what tortured this man, what drove him to Jesus, was isolation.** And so Jesus reached out and put his hands on this man's body. Jesus' desire to free this man from his isolation trumped his need to keep

himself ritually clean. He touched the man, knowing that in the eyes of others he was taking on this man's unclean state. **But by doing this he was making this man holistically clean and restoring him to life in the community.**

- F. **Jesus instructed the formerly leprous man to go to the priest and show himself to him.** He knew that this was the religious procedure for restoration, as only the priests could officially pronounce someone ritually clean and ready to re-enter society. He also knew that the priests, confronted with the evidence that this man with leprosy had now been miraculously cured, would be forced to recognize that Jesus had genuine supernatural power.
- G. **Jesus also asks something else of the man.** He asks him **not to tell others besides the priests of what has happened to him.** Some scholars believe that Jesus does this **in an attempt to try to keep his role as Messiah on the down-low.** He's not fully ready for people to hear who he is because he knows their expectations of him don't quite fit what he is there to do. Others think he knows that if it becomes public that he has touched a man with leprosy, he too will be banished to the outskirts of society for being ritually unclean. **Whatever Jesus' intention, his instruction is one the man cannot heed.** Likely his sheer enthusiasm to be reintroduced into social life compelled him to spread the word. And whether it was because of the size of the crowds Jesus was attracting or how people viewed his ceremonial state, the effect was the same. **Jesus finds himself by the end of the story as the one unable to go into the towns and villages in the area. He has taken the place out on the margins, while the man who used to be there can return home.**
- H. This same Jesus would **take great heat from some of the religious people of his day at his perceived lack of respect for ceremonial law.** This same Jesus would later speak the following warning to these folks saying, ***“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.” (Matthew 23:25-26)***
- I. **Jesus understood that in a quest to stay religiously pure, many of the cultural leaders of his day had missed the mark by neglecting the person-hood of others.** They had reduced people to their unclean conditions and driven them to the margins of society. But this isn't just about a group of Pharisees in Jesus' day. **How different is that reduction of a person's identity to a single characteristic, then what we see from many cultural leaders in our own time, even those who call themselves “Christian”?** How different is it than those who lock the doors to immigrants fleeing violence? How different is it from those who desecrate sanctuaries of worship with warfare, believing their slaughter is somehow justified because these houses of worship are filled with Muslims, or Jews, or Christians of color? No, this is not the Divine heart. Jesus came not only to make clean that which was unclean, but to demonstrate that all belong in the community of God. All are worthy of receiving healing.
- J. **John Naudé, the vicar who uses a wheelchair, wrote the following in an essay on his experience of living with disability.**
1. This is a quote of his I will read at length: *“As a 38-year-old man who uses a wheelchair and is approaching middle age, I find the concept of being not disabled quite intriguing. Many friends and colleagues tell me about the benefits of not being disabled, yet I have never felt the need or the desire to be healed or to become non-disabled. I appreciate that some people who become disabled through ill health, accident or some degenerative condition may wish to be as they were before. Yet many disabled people say the biggest issue that they have is not the impairment itself, but rather the way people respond to it.”*

2. He continues, *“Many people tell me that without my disability I would be free from pain and discrimination and be able to do so much more. Similarly, I have asked the female participants in disability awareness training, if they would prefer to be men so as to be spared the pain of menstruation and childbirth, and the discrimination against them as women. They tell me very clearly ‘No, I would not want to be a man.’... The fact of being a woman...is part of who they are. While there is an assumption that disabled people would rather not be disabled, I and other disabled people would say that the disability is part of our identity.”*
- K. **As a woman, John’s point resonates with me. I have spent much of my life caught between multiple understandings about what my gender means.** On the one hand, I was told by my family and throughout school as a young girl, “You can do anything. Girls can be whatever they want to be.” But **as an adult I’ve found it to be more complicated.** I’ve found myself butting against systems in the greater American church or my seminary that weren’t created for a person like me – a woman, a mother of small children, training to develop as a senior pastor and eventual church founder. I’ve had to sit across a table from a well-meaning friend and fellow seminary student as he told me point blank that he didn’t believe that God wanted women to be senior pastors. I’ve had to say no to opportunities for education or training or ministry involvement because I am the primary caregiver to my kids, and these opportunities assume that I have a wife at home to care for them. **And yet, I would change nothing about my gender or my motherhood.** They are gifts to me and I believe that the kind of pastor God has called me to be is a woman, a wife and a mother, despite the social challenges it brings.
- L. **So what healing does Jesus bring for John Naudé, the vicar?** Being cured of his disability is not something he is seeking or believes he needs from God. While John acknowledges that others living with disability are longing for cure, and are entitled to feel that way, John himself is not. **Rather, the healing that John needs is the same healing that the person marginalized for their gender, their ethnicity, their socio-economic status, their age, their employment history, their level of education, their sexual orientation, their political affiliation, or any other condition is in need of. They need their society to stop calling them “unclean”.** They need to be welcomed as human beings and have their unique identities affirmed. This is the healing Jesus came to bring.
- M. Before we end and move into a time of reflection, I’ve invited our own Connie Barker to share some of her story around living with disability and how it has impacted her life. (bring up Connie, she shares for 5 - 10 minutes)
- N. **Rachel Naomi Remen** is a physician, an author, a deeply spiritual woman from the Jewish tradition, and someone who has lived for most of her life with Chron’s disease. As both a physician and a patient with a life-long chronic illness, Remen has learned a lot about the limits of science and medicine, and the need for healing. *“We thought we could cure everything, but it turns out that we can only cure a small amount of human suffering. The rest of it needs to be healed, and that’s different.”* For her, the capacity to heal is often rooted in our own woundedness. *“Wounding and healing are not opposites. They’re part of the same thing. It is our wounds that enable us to be compassionate with the wounds of others. It is our limitations that make us kind to the limitations of other people. It is our loneliness that helps us to find other people or to even know they’re alone with an illness. I think I have served people perfectly with parts of myself I used to be ashamed of.”*
- O. **I think in both the medical community and the spiritual community, doing healing work can often be a way to resist our vulnerability.** It is a way to fight the truth of our frailty. But

when we do this, we generally fail to acknowledge the limits of our capacity to cure. Even the miraculous, does not liberate us from human vulnerability. **Here is the truth: every person the gospels tell us that Jesus layed hands on and miraculously cured, every one of them was sick again, or was injured again.** Ultimately, every one of them died. After miracle, there is still human frailty. There is still weakness. There is still vulnerability. God may choose to reveal Gods' self for reasons beyond our one understanding through signs and wonders like lesions disappearing from skin, but those signs are wonders are not an end to vulnerability. There is still pain, there is still loss, there are still scars that remain. **The call to healing is not a call away from vulnerability, it's a call into it.** It's a call to **acknowledge where there is loss, where there is hurt, where there is pain and to participate in caring for it for as long as that pain requires.** It's a call to allow our own wounds to be places from which we can connect and heal others. This I believe is what Jesus came to bring us into. His songs and wonders point to a deeper truth; that we are called to see beyond what is now and work together toward what could be - a world where we find in one another and in the Divine belonging, meaning, beauty, wholeness. A world where we are not defined by our wounds, but a world in which all of us can be healers and all of us can be healed. Amen.

Questions for Conversation and Reflection

1. What struck you about the way Jesus healed the man with leprosy?
2. What are some of the ways you are looking for healing in your life? How might that be different than cure? How might Haven participate in your healing?
3. What might it look like to participate in the healing of others in the Haven community? Or in other areas of your life? What areas of vulnerability do you feel called to lean into?