

Jeremiah 23:1–6

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

We landed late into Denver and made the drive to Breckenridge — 7 tired teenagers and me. In the dark, we found our condo, schlepped in the bags, and passed out. The cold, sunny morning called us up and out to get the skis rented, the boots fitted, and the lift tickets attached. Then, the kids were off to hit the fresh powder. Away from church and caregiving needs for a few days, I was ready to enjoy some nice blue runs down the mountain, beat the boys at Scrabble, and read in a coffee shop. I took a deep breath as my cell phone rang. A somber detective from a police department in a southern city was calling to tell me about the death of a young man I knew well. A charming, gifted, well-loved man. The night before, after years of suffering from severe depression and anxiety — an excruciating struggle he chose to keep well hidden from everyone — he'd taken his own life. After years of quiet planning— he released himself from debilitating psychic pain. Nothing could have shocked me more. Except perhaps, this — he'd left a note with instructions — and his immediate request was that I be contacted first — because he wanted me to be the one to tell his mother. The church was her community, the place and family he knew would hold her safe, and help her eventually to find comfort, healing and relief. He wanted me, the pastor he knew that she knew — to be there with her, to be a bridge and buffer in the unimaginable, the unthinkable. My heart was broken, but also torn.

People turn to the church for help. They turn to pastors when they have a particular need. They depend on the church to be there, for God's people to step up — when there is a crisis. Dire diagnoses, sudden deaths, and catastrophic disasters aren't set by our schedule. Ministry is an intentional decision to welcome intrusion and interruption. Jesus' life was one of interruptions, a life in which he put everyone's needs before his own. The lost sheep, the sheep without a shepherd — it wore him out, and it wore him down. Still, he tended to his own needs and taught others to retreat and rest. We model our ministries on that.

Today's story exemplifies that. Two by two, Jesus sent his disciples out without him. The twelve took on his calling to preach and teach, to heal people of their physical and mental diseases, help them repair their relationships, and find spiritual restoration. These days of doing Jesus' work and in his name were exhilarating and scary — but they've returned to tell him all about it. Now he names them "apostles"— which means "the sent ones" because they are more than followers now. But the sent ones have become the spent ones, ready for respite, relief, reconnection. But it is not to be. His apostles will experience the interruptions and intrusions that Jesus experiences. From now on, work will always follow them home.

The people were fueled by despair and faith. True believers, they didn't care where Jesus and his friends were going, or for what reason. They were desperate and determined, pursuing an end to what caused them misery. Jesus was the master. They wanted to get close, even close enough to touch the fringe of his garment, even the tattered strands of his healing hem.

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Most of us hear the passage for the day looking to find ourselves in it, to have a personal encounter with scripture. Perhaps I'm the one trying to serve Christ faithfully, and I really need a vacation. Maybe I'm the one so tired of carrying my brokenness and illness that I will do anything to have the healing touch of Jesus. Maybe I'm a colleague trying to encourage caregivers to remember the importance of respite and retreat. How we locate ourselves in any scripture we read says a lot about how we are doing and what we are coping with at that moment. Where are you in this story?

Early Christians, however, were more inclined to read scripture in corporate terms. As the church was forming and growing, early Christians wanted to know what a particular passage had to say about the nature of the church. For instance, St. Augustine, when reading the parable of the Good Samaritan, saw Jesus' disciples as being called to the work of the Samaritan, but he understood the disciples in community, the church, as the inn where the Samaritan brought the victimized man to stay. So reading today's story with that lens — where is the church?

At the heart of Jesus' ministry, he was a healer. Jesus was sent here, nurtured and raised to be a person not to suffer *for us*, but to suffer *with us*. He had a need to heal. He met their immense suffering with his power to release them, to relieve them. Blind people could see; the mute could speak. Invalids walked again. He cast out demons and rehabilitated relationships. He healed through his inclusivity, and his hospitality, his commitment to cross lines and enter into places and relationships that were forbidden. He healed by standing on the side of the poor. Jesus brought the dead back to life.

At the heart of our ministry to this community, the church is called to be a place of healing. What healing looks like is between God and the one who is hurting, but there is grace in this place that heals. Healing for the cancer patient may not be remission; healing for the alcoholic may not be sobriety; healing for the doubter will not be certainty; healing for the dying is rarely an extension of physical life. Healing is in the eye of the Creator, not the beholder. Ours is to hold space so Christ can work, and work through us. However God wills it, the church is to be a place of healing. We have a need to heal. It is the kind of healing that takes place when the faith community and those with whom they minister to reach out to one another in mutual need. The church is the fringe. When we embrace our role as the fringe of Christ's cloak, this church and every church will have a healing effect on all who desire to be made whole.

This is an uneasy calling, one that we claim with humility, undergird with unceasing prayer, and undertake by forgiveness and grace. Faith communities have too often been anything but a place of healing — rather a place of judgement and rejection, too full of doctrine and ritual, navel-gazing and self-loathing. It has made us the butt of jokes. Many Saturday Nights in my family, we laughed along as Dana Carvey brought Enid Strict to life, the popular SNL "church lady" who judged the rich and famous, condemned all things sexual, and shook her finger with a moral outrage while doing her little "superior dance" to music played by an organist named Pearl. "Well, isn't *that* special." But such comedy grows out of the tragedy of failure. Churches have, despite their best intentions, been the wounding ones, and left wounded today for it. Oppression, sexism, racism, and patriarchy have for centuries hindered the church's mission and calling to be a place of healing for all people of every race, gender orientation, sexual orientation, intellectual ability, physical ability, and mental health. For far too long, the church throughout the world failed to protect our young people, our most vulnerable to abuse. Even now the church, facing decline and increasing irrelevance, pursues power and influence, embraces particular partisan issues instead of asking what Jesus really cares about today, and renders the Gospel only good news for some. Too much of the Christian church has and still is led not by shepherds but charlatans. Every church has mangled our mission to heal and managed to wound. To name this reality — is truth. To repent — is transformation. We learn from our past, grieve the losses, celebrate the

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Spirit's presence and tenacity in working — in spite of our own need for healing — through us. The church can only be a place of healing as it is still being healed.

Marilyn Chandler McEntyre writes that churches have never occupied an altogether comfortable place in culture. “Yet churches have survived the potshots of satirists and, more consequential, internal disorders and diseases that have afflicted them for centuries. . . . A lot of them not only survive, but also thrive. Many are repositories of great spiritual wealth hidden behind flaking paint and dated amber windows. They are a last resort for people who have tried bars, bowling leagues, service clubs, and block parties, and still find themselves lonely and directionless. They offer surprises to people who come as pallbearers to their mother's funeral only to find themselves wanting, for reasons they can't quite name, to return the following week. They preserve language that lifts the mind out of the muddy waters of media-speak and into unnerving encounter with the Word that was in the beginning. Some of them. Not all of them.”

For many years, the beloved author Anne Lamott's faith took a back seat to her personal trials with bulimia, alcoholism, drug dependence, an abortion, an unplanned entrance into single motherhood, and the deaths of her father and best friend. She found healing in the support network of her local church. Lamott found a safe haven in a working-class Presbyterian Church in Marin, California. “When I was at the end of my rope, the people of St. Andrew's tied a knot for me and helped me hold on.” Her healing, her magical writing — began there, in pews.

So why do the desperate seem to turn everywhere but us? We live in a community in which it's impossible, particularly post-quarantine pandemic, to find a therapist with any openings. Virtually no psychiatrist is taking new patients. 19 million self-help books were sold in America in 2020 — Amazon has 28 different categories. Prescription drug commercials are prolific on every channel. People rightfully seek healing from many sources.

And yet — church, we must question whether we are living into that place as a source of healing. To be the fringe of Christ's cloak we must be defined by the things that defined his ministry, Jesus in the sixth chapter of Mark — hospitality and compassion.

Healing begins with hospitality. As Marilyn McEntyre writes, “The word shares the same root as *hospital* and *hospice*, both having to do with caregiving and healing. Hospitality is a form of healing: in extending food, shelter, rest, and good conversation, one is providing a place where people may be healed from the bruises and buffeting of a culture in which over-commitment has become a virtue and home a launching pad.” We say all are welcome here, but then what?

A healing hospitality protects people, and keeps them safe. The prophet Jeremiah tells us that in God's place you will find no fear, no distress, where all are welcomed, all are safe, and all can be who they are and whole. The Psalmist gives us the images we need of hospitality at this Table, of anointing

with the oil of safety and protection the sheep of God who come here to be shepherded. Hospitality is an authentic welcome where all who come are loved, are held, are safe. What is your role today in our special calling?

“He had compassion,” Mark tells us here — three little words that radically defined who Jesus was and how he fulfilled his calling. Healing can only come with compassion. Our 2021 Strategic Plan grew out of years of prayerful searching and listening about who First Pres is and wants to be for the next decade. It was clear — we must first and foremost be a culture of compassion. Compassion must live and spread through our hospitality, our creativity, our use of words, our working through legitimate disagreements, our working for justice not from a political perspective but an unquestionable dogged determination that every human being is a child of God. Compassion is that Corinthian love that does not insist on its own way.

Churches also have to be those places that are in need of healing. Like the twelve disciples, those who are sent become spent. To be a church that heals is to welcome interruptions. And together to work to meet the needs of the world that will overwhelm us. Jesus didn’t do this work alone, and neither do we. Those who were desperate knew the healing power of Jesus just in touching the fringe of his cloak. We only have to be the fringe — each of us the worn, dusty shards and threads.

I hung up with the detective, and called the team. Ministry is an intentional decision to welcome intrusion and interruption, together. I could not meet this man’s request, but he knew that we could. One of our gifted Parish Nurses went with a seasoned pastor to inform her of this tragic loss, and hold this woman in her sorrow. They called three laywomen in the church who knew her well, who went to her over the course of several days and months to walk with her, to offer pathway and community of healing. It’s not about where we find ourselves in the story, it’s about where we find the church. All of us working together, tattered but not scattered, together, the fringe of Christ’s cloak. The church, a place of healing.

+ I am indebted to the thinking of Marilyn Chandler McEntyre (Comment Magazine, September 2017; and Karen Marie Yust (Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3).

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