

“A Secret Wholeness” / Mark 1:40-45 / 12 February 2012

A team of American doctors arrived at my mission station in Cameroon, Africa. They were courtly, rotund Southern gentlemen from Mississippi, all of them white, and all of them fluent in one single language: English, Deep South English. Their English was so Southern that even the few Africans who understood English didn't quite understand their English. And yet, they had come to make trips into the bush to offer free medical care, and they needed interpreters. Looking back now, I shudder to think about the urgent medical care that was brokered and dealt by means of our high school students acting as interpreters. I was their English teacher, and let me tell you! I'm glad my life didn't depend on their skills in English! Between my students' poor English skills and the doctors' thick Southern accents, I didn't have much hope for the poor villagers we would be treating. And so, I decided to accompany the doctors to act as interpreter for any of the villagers who happened to speak the country's official language, French.

We traveled in a shabby convoy of old Toyota pickup trucks down a muddy track through the jungle, a single dirt lane with deep ruts on both sides. Whenever the trucks got stuck, the Africans and I would jump out and push while the Mississippi doctors mopped their brows and watched us from the jimweeds. One truck stopped at a village halfway down the line, while the truck I was in continued on to the next little gaggle of mud huts. Nobody was expecting us. We arrived, asked the village chief for permission to set up a free medical clinic in the church, and then they came. Wow did they come!

Passing through that part of the rainforest, you would think it was populated mainly by parrots and monkeys. We never expected to find so many people hidden away in the dense equatorial bush. When the villagers learned that there were white doctors offering free medical treatment at the church, they converged on the little pavilion-style building in droves, by the hundreds. Where were they coming from? The hamlet only had two-dozen houses! That day, the Southern gentlemen diagnosed STDs, HIV, and pregnancies gone awry. They diagnosed at least one form of cancer and many, many parasites and infections. They found waterborne diseases and diseases due to poor sanitation. They found the big three: malaria, typhoid, and yellow fever. Antibiotics were doled out like Chiclets. Shots were administered. One doctor even performed minor surgery on infected cysts.

As the sun began to sink in the sky, we thought we'd better hurry back to the mission station before nightfall. And so, we loaded up the pickup and headed back up the little dirt track. As we arrived in the first village, where we had left the other medical team, we could tell from a glance that something was not right. A handful of very frightened-looking white doctors huddled inside their pickup truck, with windows rolled shut in the equatorial heat. Hundreds of Africans swarmed around the truck, some of them pounding on it with their fists, all of them yelling things like, “No, you can't leave yet! You haven't seen me. What about my daughter? Are you going to let her die? My mother hasn't gotten out of bed in two weeks! I'm cold all the time; just give me some quinine! Please!” Of course, the frightened doctors understood not a word of it.

In retrospect, I guess I was trying to impress those American doctors when I jumped out of our truck and started talking to the villagers in French, a language many of them understood. I guess I just wanted those MDs from Mississippi to see what a seasoned-old-hand I was at getting around Africa. But when the villagers saw a foreigner speaking a language they understood, they suddenly all turned on me.

Grabbing me, pulling at me, yelling in their very best French. “Doctor! You have to help me! Please, don’t go!” It was one of the scariest, saddest, most desperate moments of my life, for we didn’t have time to treat them before nightfall, and there was nothing I could do. I had all I could do just to scramble back into the pickup, and then we inched our way gently through the increasingly angry crowds of sick people, who would never be treated, and we made for the little dirt lane that served as our lifeline to the larger world. We escaped. But it was ugly and scary. It’s just that there’s such urgency, such fear, when people are suffering, when people stand in need of healing.

I have to wonder if that’s how the crowds came at Jesus? Pleading and calling out, yammering and hollering, begging for attention, pushing past each other, maybe even getting impatient and loud, maybe getting a little bit scary! When Jesus touched that man with the leprosy sores, he broke some very serious religious laws of his day, rules that are still on the books in Leviticus. In ancient times, a leper was an outcast, someone to be shunned. Touching one was absolutely forbidden. But Jesus couldn’t resist the broken man, calling out from the margins of society. He was always reaching out to the pariahs of his day. And so, I ask, which was the greater act of healing: to take away the man’s disease, or to look past all his ugliness and all the things that society held against that man, and to welcome him as a fellow human being? Jesus re-included an outcast into the human family. And still today, the greatest—the only—acts of healing that you and I can perform are those bold acts that draw the outsider in. And sometimes, like Jesus, we may have to break the rules in order to do it!

Even the most skeptical of historians usually admits that Jesus of Nazareth was known as a healer in his day. Many people believe that he cured people by using traditional, herbal concoctions. The gospels have preserved a few accounts of Jesus using a kind of salve made from clay and spittle; other healing stories mention Jesus’ use of mineral water to alleviate some ailments. And of course, many people believe that Jesus’ healings were miraculous. We’re learning about the psychosomatic dimension of illness, the interrelatedness of body, mind, and spirit: how a troubled mind can lead to a sick body. Conversely, we’re learning that spiritual and emotional well-being can often help to bring about well-being in the body. This is why, when our daughter Chloe spent four months in the hospital, we received regular visits from a music therapist who played the ukulele. She knew that music could help to heal our emotions. We also received visits from a monk dressed like Friar Tuck, in a brown robe tied with a rope around his waste; he knew that prayer could help to restore our spirits—and perhaps even help to heal one very small body. For the true key to well-being is to find a place where body, mind, and spirit can all live together in a happy state of balance. Balance!

That’s what well-being is about: finding lives of balance, lives where work is tempered with rest, lives where responsibilities are tempered with play, lives where pursuing our daily bread is tempered with pursuing the greater good of the world around us. Balance! To each day its measure of work and rest, responsibility and play, solitude and togetherness. To each day its measure of noise and silence, movement and stillness, joking and praying. How many a mind and body is wrecked by the imbalance of too much work, or too much play? Too much solitude or too little? How many people have sacrificed their long-term well-being by loading their hours so full of tedium and strain that, at the end of the day, there’s no time or energy left for the things that bring them joy? Is yours a life of balance? If not, it will show, sooner or later.

A man walks into work with bandages on both ears. His boss asks him what happened, and the man says he was ironing shirts when the phone rang; he accidentally answered the iron. Psss! His boss asks, "What happened to the other ear?" The man replies, "Well, I had to call a doctor." Have you ever noticed how much we idolize the medical profession in America today? Consider all the TV shows that are set in hospitals of all places! We've all been inside hospitals, and we know they're not glamorous. They're sterile, and utilitarian, and cold, with windowless, fluorescent-lit rooms. And yet, there's *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Scrubs*, and *General Hospital*, and even *MASH* was about a kind of hospital. We're preoccupied with being cured and made well; everyone wants to live forever. But for most of us, the real issue is not "healing," but "wholeness." And not to disparage medicine, but wholeness comes from leading lives of balance. Of course, the mystery remains that some well-balanced people end up journeying through serious illness, while some true rascals live to be a hundred.

Most churches nowadays don't promise physical healing, but we do attempt to point people in the direction of wholeness—perhaps even in the midst of disease. Wholeness doesn't usually occur with all the suddenness of a miracle, it occurs a little at a time, over long years of well-integrated living. Consider the study that was done about five years ago, which found that 45% of people who attended synagogue or church rated themselves as "very happy," while only 25% of religiously inactive people called themselves "very happy." People who participate in regular religious activities typically have longer life expectancy. The correlation between faith and health is a constant surprise for statisticians in the medical community. I'm convinced that it comes from the effect positive emotions have on the body. Better health also comes from having the support of a faith community in times of joy and sorrow. Religious practice creates balance in our life, and balance—in time—brings about wholeness. Even a seriously ill person can lead a life of wholeness.

But let's return to this ancient story from the gospel of Mark, where a man made physically hideous, a man deformed by some skin disease, comes crying out to be made whole. Beneath his cries for physical wellness are the lonely cries of a person who, through no fault of his own, has been kicked out of human society. Imagine waking up one day to find a sore on your arm and knowing that it would overtake your whole life, and exclude you from the human family. In all honesty, religion was part of the leper's problem! And all religions have been guilty of this: making outsiders of some and insiders of others. Leviticus says, "A leper shall wear torn clothes and never comb his hair. And when someone approaches him, he shall call out 'Beware! I'm unclean!' And he shall remain alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp." It was religion's job to protect society from contamination, although we know today that 95% of people are naturally immune to leprosy. Religion made an outcast of the person most in need of human community: the seriously ill. And Jesus, in compassion and outrage, dismissed the religious rules of his own faith in order to follow the higher law of love. He touched the leper, committing a religious sin, and in so doing, he restored the leper to human community. His act of healing was to include the outcast, contaminating himself in order to embrace the one who had been deemed unworthy of the human family.

Oh, the lepers calling out from the margins of our world, asking to be included into positions of love and respect from which they have been shut out—perhaps by the church! If I had it to do over, I wish I'd had the courage to say to those American

doctors, “Hey, why don’t we just spend the night here in the village? Is there some rule that we have to be back to the mission station before dark? Is it because we need modern toilets and running water? Some of these people might die if they’re not treated. Just for tonight, we can break the rule that says we have to sleep in comfortable beds. There’s a higher law of love calling out to us.”

But I didn’t say it. Even the good guys who’d come from afar to offer free medical care, even they weren’t willing to sleep in mud huts among the poor of the world. Oh, the lepers! When Jesus touched that leper so long ago, he said, “Let this be our little secret. Don’t tell anyone.” A secret wholeness! But the leper had been rehabilitated for the human family, and he couldn’t help but go out and tell the great good news. Are there people whom you’ve held at arm’s length for fear of them, but whom you could heal and restore just by treating them like human beings? Are there people in your life just waiting for you to turn and offer a healing touch, but who, in your fear, or resentment, or anger, or bitterness, you treat as a leper, condemning them forever to a life outside your graces? Include the outsider, reach out to the untouchable, love the unlovable, for it is within your power to reach out and heal a broken world. Amen.