

Works of Healing
Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego
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*Gracious God,
Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.
Amen.*

Our readings seem to diverge this morning. In the gospel just heard, Jesus engages in two acts of healing. After verbally sparring with an amazingly graceful and persistent mother, he casts a demon out of a young girl. Then, down the road and just a bit later, he restores a man's capacity for speech and hearing. He tells the crowd to keep it to themselves; they, of course, blab it out to all in the vicinity. So that's the gospel.

Our other lessons appear to take up a very different theme. They concern themselves with the material needs of the poor. This now from the Book of Proverbs: "The rich and poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all... Those who are generous are blessed for they share their bread with the poor. Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord pleads their cause."

James picks up the theme in the epistle and takes to task those who make economic distinctions within the Body of Christ: "If a person with gold rings and fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person with dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or, 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?"

So, again, two important but seemingly dissimilar themes; healing on the one hand and sensitivity to the needs of the poor on the other. I propose we hold all these readings together on this Labor Day weekend and reflect upon the healing that occurs when the abundance of God is made available to all.

We begin by remembering that we are by no means the first to make the connection between civic healing and distributive justice. Earlier this week I had the chance to reread some material on the Social Gospel Movement. I was reminded that Christian leaders have been pursuing this cause since the late-19th century. This was a movement of progressive Protestants triggered by the social strains of the Gilded Age – industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. The leaders of this movement came to believe that social salvation took precedence over personal salvation. Preachers of this ilk emphasized the nearness of God and valued good works over theological certitude. They supported the labor

movements that were coming into being, sought to abolish the practice of child labor, and advocated for a shorter workweek and factory regulation.

The Episcopal Church – often seen as historically detached from the suffering of the poor – was actually one of the leading denominations in the Social Gospel Movement. The movement reached its apex in the early years of the 20th century and was then eclipsed by the growth of fundamentalism in America. Indeed, fundamentalism rose, in part, in response to the perceived excesses of the Social Gospellers; the early leaders of that movement held that individual salvation was indeed the paramount, if not sole, concern of the church. Some even went so far as to say that neither Jesus nor the apostles were reformers and, because of that, believers should leave social causes alone. Efforts at social improvement were seen as counter-productive because they moved the human family away from dependence on God and towards a spirit of self-sufficiency.

The Social Gospel cause died down in the 20's and then reemerged in the 60's and the decades that followed. The Episcopal Church once again positioned itself at the forefront of the movement. Both clergy and lay people now actively support low-wage workers in their efforts to obtain a living wage and medical benefits. We're not being politically correct when we do this; this action occurs in response to the demands of scripture, to readings like those heard this morning. We believe that God has expressed in both testaments a profound concern for the needs of the poor. We also believe that healing is made possible when we act on behalf of our neighbor.

This healing is multi-faceted; it is spiritual, physical, and social. Case in point: as much as we wish we could make people well by pronouncing it from afar, a la Jesus, or by the laying on of hands, most of us recognize that God usually uses doctors and nurses to bring healing about these days. In fact, the sufferers in today's gospel would now most likely be treated by psychiatrists and speech therapists. This is not to discount the role of the Great Physician – all healing comes from God – but it is to say that the presence of God in this world is generally known through the good deeds and good work of God's people.

That being true, access to health care becomes a faith issue. Social Gospel preachers and activists are not policy analysts – we can't say for sure which resolution will best serve the nation. We admit that issues of this magnitude are always complex. But some ideas are better than others; they usually emerge when people of good will and differing opinions share insight with one another in a respectful way. Packing weapons and invoking the death-culture of the Nazis won't help. There is a better way.

But, as I was saying, preachers are not policy analysts; in this arena, we're more like prophets. We can discuss various remedies and responses but we can't back away from the vision of the beloved community tending to the needs of the least, the last, and the lost (to quote our Presiding Bishop). As Christians, we are

indeed our brother's and our sister's keeper. Using the language of James, we forever renounce favoritism, distinctions made between rich and poor, and pray and work for a universal standard that allows all people to pay their bills, go to school (including college), and access health care, as needed. That won't bring in the Kingdom – we're not deluded – but it's a pretty good start.

Now here the old charge could once again be applied – this is NOT the business of the church! Your job, preacher, is to lead people into salvation. I agree completely – but what is salvation? Going to heaven? Certainly. But is that it? Aren't we also called to create the kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven?”

Perhaps this is where the Social Gospellers and the Fundamentalists got off course, by creating a binary spiritual world wherein only one possibility could prevail; heaven on earth or forsake this earth in the hope of heaven. Perhaps these are but two sides of the same coin; going to heaven at the end – we are saved by grace through faith - and bringing heaven to earth in the meantime – faith without works is dead.

Perhaps this is the complete job description for the baptized, one that I gladly embrace as we – Republican and Democrat, conservative and liberal, management and labor – pledge once again to create the beloved community, to pursue the spiritual, physical, and social healing that attends economic sensitivity. We are all in this together. In that common spirit, let us now continue to worship the One who creates the whole human family and who also pleads the cause of the poor. Amen.