HEALING AND WHOLENESS
February 8, 2015, The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Isaiah 40: 21-23, 28-31; Mark 1: 29-34
Michael L. Lindvall, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York
Theme: God sometimes offers healing; God always offers wholeness.

Help us to look closely, God of Grace, so that we might glimpse you in all things: in the high and the low, in simplicity and wisdom, in happiness and in sorrow, in silence and word. Open our eyes in this hour that we might see your truth in ancient Scripture. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Just a month ago last Friday, a remarkable young man named Josh Wright was driving to work on M-20, a ruler-straight east-west highway in West Michigan. There was an accident – a bad one. Josh’s injuries were very serious. We knew Josh because he waited tables in the summer at our funky little yacht club. We knew the rest of his family because they served what they called “farm dinners” on the front lawn of their 40 acres in the middle of nowhere, farm dinners we often attended. Josh was actually the reason the family had moved to the farm. He’d struggled with horrific allergies as a young child and the family felt they needed to move to the country for their son. Josh and his seven siblings were all home-schooled. They’re pillars of their little Presbyterian church. The family is tight. Josh was a handsome, sweet-tempered, hard-working kid. He was a champion sheep-shearer and planned to become a professional.

The club secretary sent out an email about the accident. Josh was in the hospital and the family was asking for prayers. I prayed, as doubtless did hundreds of folks on the receiving end of that email. I prayed every morning and every night for Josh to be healed. He wasn’t. He died five days later.

I’ve prayed for a lot of people to be healed – members of my family, friends like Josh, myself. I’ve prayed for many of you. I’ve prayed for perfect strangers to be

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healed. Often those prayers have been answered. People I prayed for got better; they were healed; they lived.

When I was in college my three-year-old baby sister Liz ended up in the hospital with an extreme fever. The child was delirious. The diagnosis was spinal meningitis; the prognosis was guarded at best. I didn’t do much praying in those days, except maybe during final exams, but I prayed for Liz like I hadn’t prayed before. Much to the surprise of the doctors, she rallied. They said it wasn’t meningitis after all. They didn’t know what it was. She’s presently on a birthday cruise in the Caribbean with her husband. Miracle? Misdiagnosis? Who knows? It sure felt like an answer to prayer.

But so often my prayers are not answered, at least not the way I wanted. I am totally realistic about this, but I plan to go on praying anyway.

Both of the Scripture passages that Suzanne read, as well as the Psalm that formed our Call to Worship, promise healing. The Psalm assures us that “God heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” Then those lovely words from Isaiah we just heard promise God’s strengthening presence with Jewish refugees on the long and perilous road home from Babylon to Jerusalem. “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles.” In the Gospel lection from Mark, Jesus first heals Peter’s mother-in-law and then “cured many who were sick with various diseases...”

Here is the simple truth as I have experienced it. God does indeed bring healing – at least sometimes, maybe often. God does it in lots of ways. God heals through modern medicine – surgeons and hospitals and pharmaceuticals. God heals with time and the wonder that is the human body, a wonder we often take for granted. And God heals in ways that seem extraordinary and miraculous. A cancer just disappears – spontaneous remission. A deadly virus abates for no obvious reason. Meningitis isn’t meningitis. Prayers are flung at the heavens and somebody who wasn’t expected to make it does. It happens; I’ve seen it.
But not always. That’s the rest of the truth as I’ve known it, the reality you’ve doubtless known, is that sometimes people are not healed. Young Josh Wright, for instance.

One Sunday a month, Brick holds a brief service in the Chapel at about noon called “A Service for Healing and Wholeness.” It’s not called simply “A Service for Healing,” and it’s not merely “A Service for Wholeness.” It’s both, and that language makes a critically important point. We do dare to pray for healing, that is we pray that people might be cured of their diseases or freed from their demons, just as Jesus did that day. But we also pray for wholeness. Wholeness is bigger than healing. Wholeness is the peace, the acceptance, the integrity, the trust, the fullness that God always offers, healing or no. Sometimes wholeness comes with healing; sometimes wholeness must come without healing. That is to say, you can be healed and be whole. But it’s also true that you might not be healed, but still be made whole. God sometimes offers healing, but God always offers wholeness.

One August Sunday a few summers back, Bob Davis, the pastor of Old Cutler Presbyterian Church in Miami, made an announcement that his congregation wasn’t ready for. “For several Sundays, he had been preaching on the healing power of God. As the members listened to this fifty-two year-old former All-American football player who had been their pastor for fourteen years, their eyes filled with tears as he told them he had Alzheimer’s disease and must resign. This is what he preached that day: “As a Christian I belong completely to Christ. My life is not mine but Christ’s. Today my ministry draws to a close and I can say with Paul, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now I stand at the finish line in victory, because God set the distance I was to run . . .” When asked, “What about miracles?”, Davis answered, “I am like Paul, whose thorn in the flesh God did not remove, and I don’t expect God will remove my Alzheimer’s thorn.” But, he said at the last, “I have made up my mind to find joy in weakness . . . a deeper experience of the power of Christ.” Bob Davis was not healed. But he was made whole. God sometimes offers healing; God always offers wholeness.

I read an essay in a magazine a few months ago written by a young father. He began by confessing that he believes God really heals people – quite literally heals people of their diseases. He said he’s seen it happen. He then wrote that he and

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his wife have two children with regressive autism. Both children have lost their ability to sing, to clap, to hold spoons. Their parents and their church have prayed for them, prayed their hearts out. But his children have not been healed. Mostly, they’re getting worse.

Then he wrote that there are different kinds of healing. First, he does believe in miraculous healing, the stories in the Bible, the kind of inexplicable healing he’s sometimes seen and all of us have heard about – if only once and again. Then he writes about a second kind of healing – the body heals itself. A virus attacks your body and your white blood cells kick in. Then there’s the third type of healing – you break a bone and the doctor puts a cast on it. Or a surgeon cuts out the tumor, or the antibiotics or the chemo work – modern medicine. It often heals, but not always.

I have already mentioned these three kinds of healing, but this young dad then speaks bravely of the fourth type of healing. He speaks of this last kind of healing in the majestic and mythic vocabulary of First Corinthians: “The trumpet sounds and the dead are raised in the twinkling of an eye, never to perish again. Corrupted bodies become incorruptible; sickness and affliction never befall them. The sterile smell of the operating room corridor is no more… Every deaf ear is unblocked, every damaged limb is repaired, every blind eye sees. Autism, Down syndrome, schizophrenia…, Alzheimer’s disease are swallowed up in victory. And the last enemy to be destroyed is death. Nobody cries, except with joy.”

Bred into the bone of Christian conviction is the mysterious but irreducible trust that, by God, there is a final, final healing – a consummate wholeness beyond this veil. The father of those two little ones with regressive autism concluded his essay with these daring words, “God never says no to a request for healing. He either says ‘Yes,’ or ‘Not yet.’” God sometimes offers healing; God always offers wholeness.

Like that young father, I believe that God heals, heals in all sorts of ways – medical, miraculous, natural. All are from God one way or the other.

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But I also believe in the possibility of wholeness, that healing-beyond-healing, the healing of spirit and soul. Wholeness can come in this life. A person is not literally healed, but she lives her days with joy and meaning anyway. A person is still physically ill, lives his life with acceptance and peace nonetheless.

And finally, God also brings the wholeness which lies beyond this life. Young Josh Wright was not healed of the injuries he sustained in that car crash on M-20. But with all my being I trust that Josh is whole. **God sometimes offers healing; God always offers wholeness.**

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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