

*There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole,
There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.
Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my works in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.
There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole,
There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.
If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus, and say, "He died for all."
There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole,
There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.*

Many of you may be familiar with this hymn. It is one of the many beautiful hymns in our hymnal; and is one of our Presiding Bishop's favorites. If you have ever watched or read any of his sermons you probably remember him quoting this hymn. It is not just a favorite; it is part of his spiritual DNA.

Despite our Presiding Bishop's love and use of this hymn in his sermons, the name Gilead has taken on an extremely negative image thanks in part to the popular television series *The Handmaid's Tale* where Gilead is an oppressive society, especially oppressive to women. But there is a lot more to Gilead than a television show based on the novel by Margaret Atwood. Gilead goes all the way back to the Old Testament and the prophet Jeremiah.

In the Old Testament book Jeremiah, we learn Gilead was a region of mountains east of the Jordan River known for a miraculous ointment made by highly skilled physicians who invented it using gum from trees indigenous to the area. That tree gum ointment was the balm of Gilead that could supposedly heal any bodily ailment. The people of Israel believed in the ointment's mysterious power to heal, and they traveled to the region of Gilead to purchase large amounts of the expensive ointment. This practice troubled Jeremiah. Not because he didn't want people to be well, but because he recognized there was much more to wellness than curing physical ailments. True healing is the restoration of relationships, especially the relationship with God. Jeremiah understood life is so much more than surviving day to day; life isn't just consuming oxygen, consuming food, consuming cures to fix bodily ailments. Jeremiah was constantly trying to get the attention of God's People and remind them to turn to God for restoration of wholeness, for there is no magical ointment or balm in Gilead or anywhere on earth that can heal a person's spirit or soul. There is no balm in Gilead or anywhere else on earth that can relieve suffering caused by oppression. Only God can do that.

This is where today's Gospel comes into this sermon. The section of Mark's Gospel we just heard reveals Jesus is the balm that heals far more than ailments, he restores life to those seen by society to be dead or as good as dead – the outcast - and can heal the wounds of a community that has forgotten God's love.

Today's Gospel speaks of so much that is unwell in the lives of individuals, families, institutions, and communities. This unwellness is seen in Jairus, a man of authority who set aside his power to ask Jesus to heal his daughter who was severely ill. Obviously, Jairus cared for his daughter, who at twelve years of age would have been much closer to adulthood than modern twelve-year-olds. Notice what he asked Jesus for: that Jesus touch his daughter so that she would be made well and live. This speaks to a deeper unwellness than just a bodily illness; it speaks to a desperate fear of losing someone beloved, a loss that would be felt in the fabric of the family. In other words, the entire family was suffering.

They weren't alone in their suffering. There was also a woman in today's Gospel who isn't named but her suffering sure is. We don't know her medical diagnosis, but it sounds awful. For twelve long years, the same number of years Jairus' daughter has been alive, this woman has been losing blood. Even worse, no physician, no cure, not even the mysterious, legendary balm of Gilead could stop the bleeding and heal this woman.

Because her name was not recorded in Mark's Gospel, Biblical scholars and commentators usually refer to her as the "hemorrhaging woman". In so doing, they don't realize they have pointed out another unwellness in the Gospel: dehumanizing the sick by identifying them by their illness. It's a subtle way of making someone outcast or less than others because their condition makes them unfit for participation in society. It is a type of oppression. We can try and be understanding and explain this as times being different, people not being as educated or having the medical resources we have today, and fear contagion. But there is a significant difference in intentionally removing people from family, religion, and community life by labeling them as "unclean" versus providing care that makes room for them to participate in society, religion, and family. Being cast out is what the woman who I prefer to call the persistent woman had undoubtedly experienced because when she entered the Gospel she did so alone, hidden in the shadows of the crowd. No one took her to Jesus, no one approached Jesus on her behalf like Jairus did for his daughter. The persistent woman was on her own.

That is a lot of pain for one Gospel reading. Jeremiah was right, there is no way any magical ointment can salve all those wounds. Even in our modern era there is no singular medical procedure that can fix all that, there is no one medicine that would cure everyone, there is nothing, not even a diet of eating the right foods, that can fix all that suffering. Because that suffering isn't just physical. It's spiritual. It's relational. It's communal. There may be a mythical balm in Gilead, but it quickly loses its magic in the face of so much pain and sorrow.

That is where we find Jesus in today's Gospel. In the midst of all that suffering, all that sorrow, all that pain. It's no wonder he felt the slightest touch of the persistent woman as she lightly brushed the hem of his clothing. Her action, spurred by the hope or faith that Jesus – not an ointment – had the ability to stop the bleeding and restore her to her family, to society, might have been the only thing that felt like hope in all that suffering. The persistent woman remembered the message of Jeremiah.

Which is why Jesus stopped right then and there and turned around and looked around and asked for the person who touched him to come out of the shadows of the crowd. I believe it is worth our time to notice what makes Jesus stop in his tracks, especially in Mark's Gospel where Jesus seems to be on the move a lot, even when he's napping like last week's Gospel. The persistent woman's touch made Jesus stop. We should wonder why. If her ailment was finally over, if she suddenly physically felt better than she had in twelve years, wasn't that enough? Wouldn't it be more practical for Jesus to keep on going? After all, we can't forget Jairus and his daughter both suffering and in need of healing too. Why would Jesus stop, why would Jesus delay rescuing a girl from dying to speak to someone who seems to have taken care of her problem herself?

Because Jesus did not come to replace a magic ointment that will cure all physical ailments. That can be hard to hear and to understand. If Jesus is the love of God on earth, wouldn't Jesus want us to be free from physical pain? Sure. But remember it wasn't just the persistent woman's bleeding that was the cause of unwellness, it was being cast out, being considered less because she was sick that causes just as much if not more suffering. I wonder if one of the biggest mistakes we make about health is assuming health is only a body free of blemish or ailment. Jesus didn't come to put a band aid on our unwellness, he came to restore wholeness through relationship with God and each other. To show us health is also how we care for each other.

That is why he needed to meet the persistent woman. To name her not based on the source of her suffering, but to give her the name she always had, the name of one beloved by God: daughter. She isn't alone. She is God's own beloved. She needed to hear that. Everyone in the crowd needed to hear it. As a beloved child of God, Jesus gave the persistent woman another tremendous gift: the opportunity to tell the whole truth.

Providing the opportunity to tell the whole truth, not just what we want to hear, is essential to healing, to restoration to society, to each other and to God. Notice there is no shame in today's Gospel, no judgement by Jesus; he did not use the woman's action to put her down in order to lift himself up. Jesus has no need for such unhealth. He loves and gives that love so freely there is no room for cruelty. That is why Jesus made room for the woman and the truth he and the people in the crowd needed to hear. The truth that is part of the healing.

The truth the crowd perhaps wasn't ready to hear or understand or receive because Jairus, who must have been standing by all the time Jesus and the persistent, truthful woman were talking, was approached by a member of his household, and told it was too late. His daughter was dead. And people said there was no need to trouble Jesus anymore. At that moment it could be tempting to suspect Jesus chose one life over another, that in making room for the persistent woman a little girl lost her life. But that is not true. The truth is Jesus does not operate out of scarcity. In Jesus there is abundance of love. And the little girl was also restored to life.

We aren't sure if she was medically dead, or if it just seemed she was dead, but perhaps the point of the Gospel is it doesn't really matter. What matters is how Jesus doesn't give up on what most of us consider lost causes. Jesus doesn't see people that way. Jesus doesn't respond to pain and suffering and loss by dismissing or oppressing those who suffer.

That is what makes Jesus the balm of healing, of the kind of restoration that is truly needed. I'm not saying anything against the medical community, the doctors, nurses, physical therapists, and many people who work hard, and have certainly worked even harder during the pandemic, to heal human bodies. But health care isn't just about the physical healing, as I've learned throughout my recovery from two hip replacement surgeries in three months. My recovery toward restoration of movement isn't just work for my surgeon, it is work for my physical therapists, for me, my family, and the prayers and support of all of you and my colleagues in the diocese. Restoration of wellness happens when we practice the love of God by making room for healing, for each other and pray for each other. Afterall, what are Christians if not wounded healers in need of healing?

We need to remember healing doesn't come from a magic ointment; it comes from the One who is Life, Jesus. This doesn't mean we ignore medical advice or practice. It means we incorporate it into our whole lives, recognizing physical healing won't happen without the spiritual, emotional, and mental healing.

We may not be as different as the people, families, and systems from today's Gospel. In a time that can feel like a rush and push to go back to what life was like before the pandemic, we can miss the suffering, the tiredness, the sorrow around us. I realize not everyone suffered during the pandemic, but that doesn't mean we ignore those who did. Perhaps instead of rushing to recreate what was, maybe we can move forward in love, making room for each other, be courageous enough to listen to the whole truth, resist trying to ostracize people for being different, and create something far more loving and healing where we can feel the renewal that is at the heart of the beloved hymn There is a balm in Gilead, and that balm is the love of God in Christ.