

Arvada
United Methodist Church

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In Search of Wholeness

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Luke 17: 12-19

Today we're asking about health and wholeness. What's the relationship between them?

One day Linus is sitting on the curb talking to Charlie Brown, telling him about his aspirations: "Charlie Brown, when I get big I'm going to be a humble little country doctor. I'll live in the city, see, and every morning I'll get up, climb into my sports car and zoom into the country! Then I'll start healing people. I'll heal everybody for miles around." And in the last frame he concludes, "I'll be a world famous humble little country doctor."

Can you imagine being a physician, a nurse, a care-giver with the health of your patients in your hands? You would likely want the person to find a sense of wholeness and well-being that lies beneath whatever their physical challenge may be. Most of us would like to find that. Is it possible? (pray)

Can we abide in wholeness no matter what? Is that perhaps the call of faith?

We heard the story as told by Luke. Here it is told another way by Ralph Wilson¹:

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Ten men silhouetted along the low ridge called to the leader of a small band below:  
"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

Bartholomew glanced up. Lepers, he thought. Ragged, pitiable lepers. From the time their skin disease was diagnosed, they were cut off from society, forced to live on their own in caves or huts away from towns. A fortunate few had relatives who would leave food for them, but many had no one. They weren't allowed close enough to beg for a living. Ragged, thin, rejected. Lepers. Even the word spoke an icy finality.

"Have mercy on us!"

Their pleading cut through Bart's thoughts. Jesus was cupping his hands now, and calling across the low valley which lay between the road and the ridge where the lepers stood. His voice rang out sharp and compelling in the stillness of the morning.

"Go! Show yourselves to the priests!"

The lepers looked at each other. You only went to the priests if your leprosy was gone. Only the priests could issue a clean bill of health so you could return to your family.

As they held up their decayed limbs, they were asking, "Why go unless we're healed?" They looked over to Jesus again, but he was conversing with Peter and John, and they didn't catch his eyes.

But then Bart heard a shout, a cry of exaltation, a loud eerie call that filled the valley and bounced off the hills: "I'm healed! I'm whole. My leprosy is gone! It's gone!"

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Bart looked around in time to catch a smile at the corners of Jesus' mouth. The healing hadn't occurred as the lepers stood looking and wondering. It had taken place as they had begun to *trust* Jesus' words. "*As they went*" they were healed.

Suddenly a lone figure broke from the circle of rejoicing ex-lepers. He bounded over the little creek and raced towards them, rags fluttering behind him. He sped toward Jesus and then landed on his knees before the Master in a cloud of fine dust.

He spoke just a phrase -- "Thank you, Master" -- in a sort of broken accent, the accent of Samaria. Then he just knelt there sobbing.

Jesus spoke now, not really to the leper, but beyond him somehow, as if to the whole world. "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

Bart's mind spun. He thought of the countless times God had answered his prayers, provided for his family, given him work, healed his sickly daughter. How often had he really said "Thanks"? Too often he had taken these blessings for granted, rejoicing in his good fortune, but seldom racing back to the Giver with a word of heartfelt thanks on his lips.

As the man knelt, Jesus' hand instinctively rested on his head, blessing, and at the same time stroking and smoothing the tangles left from years of sojourn. Jesus wept as he caressed the man's head, tears making rivulets down his cheeks into his beard.

Bart looked up. The leper band was now heading off towards the priests' village. They had received physical healing, indeed, but the man at Jesus' feet had received a healing of his whole person. As Jesus helped him up, he said, "Rise and go. Your faith has made you whole."

The newly-whole Samaritan embraced Jesus. Then they stood there for a moment looking at one another -- smile meeting smile. The gift of healing had sent him the message of God's love, but thanks had brought him home.

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Is there a sense of home, wholeness, offered to us that abides independent of our physical well-being?

Two interpretive notes about this story that I find interesting. First, the word faith.

Marcus Borg explores the meaning of "faith" in those days, and describes one meaning as a loyalty of heart rather than a belief of mind (*The Heart of Christianity*, 25-41). Where is our loyalty of heart, in any given moment?

Second, the word "well." If we were sitting here a few decades ago, we would have heard the story read from the King James Version, and Jesus would be saying, "Go, your faith has made you *whole*." That's because the Greek word for whole and well is

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interchangeable, and also means “saved.” Interestingly, the English words “well,” “whole,” “health,” “healing,” and “holy” all have the same root. Wellness is not separate from wholeness, or holiness. It is of the sacred.

In the Brown Bag Bible Study, someone said when Jesus heals, or makes whole, or saves, he is always saving *into abundant life*. There’s wisdom in that comment.

I believe that wholeness or abundant life includes but is not dependent on physical health.

I believe each moment we are being invited into wholeness, life renewed and refreshed, and sacred, and each moment is a new chance to respond.

I believe such wholeness includes all—all around us--every human and critter and gift of the universe.

Catherin Keller puts it this way:

“I cannot exist without in some sense taking part in you, in the child I once was, in the breeze stirring the down on my arm, in the child starving far away, in the flashing round of the spiral nebula.” (Catherine Keller, quoted in Spiritual Literacy, 93)

I believe that the call to wholeness is not different from the call to love God and love neighbor. *“And who is our neighbor?”* asks one writer. *“The Samaritan? The outcast? The enemy? Yes, yes, of course, but it is also the whale, the dolphin and the rainforest. Our neighbor is the entire community of life, the entire universe. We must love it all as our self.” (Brian Patrick, Spiritual Literacy, 93).*

Wholeness is not about being cured. It is about a sense of connection within that cannot be violated by physical challenge. And it is about a sense of connection without that includes all of life. It’s about an openness of heart to recognize the sacred invitation, like the one leper who saw, and responded with thanks. He was made whole.

When we come to the table, sharing in the bread and the cup, we are, again to quote a Brown Bagger, invited to commit ourselves to the wholeness that Jesus embodied and never wavered from. We’re invited to remember that God can be no other than the god of the whole. And that wholeness includes the 40 million people without health insurance. It includes the hungry child down the street and across the ocean. It includes the soldiers barely sleeping and the mother with a new illness worrying about her children.

It includes the sparrow and the whale...

Wholeness is finding a way to say awe, praise, save, grace, thanks like the leper, care, life, love, peace, joy, home, no matter what, giving the loyalty of our heart, our faith, our lives, to the eternal source of meaning that beckons and renews.

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This search for wholeness is captured by a beautiful hymn. *God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale*. It's found on page 122.

ⁱ Ralph Wilson, "A Leper's Thanksgiving" *The Joyful Heart*, Issue 3, November 23, 1996.