“Doctor, Go Heal Yourself”

Fourth Week after Epiphany

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He answered, “I suppose you’re going to quote the proverb,

‘Doctor, go heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we heard you did in Capernaum.’ Well, let me tell you something: No prophet is ever welcomed in his hometown.”

Luke 4:22-30

 “Doctor, go heal yourself,” Jesus quotes an old Jewish proverb in today’s Gospel lesson from Luke.

There is an ancient practice of praying with scripture called “*Lectio Divino*.” I rarely use this practice, but I decided to pull out the old tradition this week when I was stuck. As a preacher, there are weeks when I get stuck. The title I picked and the idea I had when I sent off the lesson plans over a month ago to the Rooster Crows newsletter now seems like a blurry mess. What was I thinking? Do I have a message this week?

“Doctor, go heal yourself,” was the sentence that jumped out at me a month ago and as I began to pray using *lectio divino.* What is *lectio*?

The phrase *lectio divina* means “divine reading” in Latin and is a fitting name for this prayer practice of listening to Scripture with the ear of the heart. *Lectio* *divina* (often called “lectio” for short) is **a dialogue with God through Scripture** that includes the whole self: thoughts, images, memories, desires, etc. The movements within *lectio* *divina* involve reading, listening to, responding to and resting in the Word of God. It can be practiced alone or with a community.

The origins of the practice began with Catholic monastics in the 6th century as a way of entering daily community prayer. It has developed over time into the practice we know today of reading God’s Word and attending to God’s presence therein. The four movements within *lectio divina* are reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation.

I love this quote from a female saint in the Catholic faith known as St. Therese of Lisieux. She writes,

“Above all it’s the Gospels that occupy my mind when I’m at prayer; my poor soul has so many needs, and yet this is the one thing needful. I’m always finding fresh lights there, hidden and enthralling meanings.”

Therese was born in France in 1873 and was one of nine children. Her mother died of breast cancer when she was four years old. One of her older sisters looked after her until she joined the Carmelite order five years later. Therese decided to join the Carmelites as well and joined the convent at age 14. She suffered from poor health her entire time as a nun. And died at 24. Despite all her struggles, she wrote vociferously. I love this quote from her journals about her struggle to find meaning in the Gospels. “Jesus isn't doing much to keep the conversation going."[[1]](#footnote-1)

If St. Therese got mad at Jesus for staying silent, we can also get mad for Jesus failing to keep up the conversation.

 **And yet, I digress, what is it about this one phrase, “Doctor, heal thyself” that keeps leaping off the page at me?**

1. I think it rings true to me because I know as a pastor, I need to work on my own wounds before I can work to heal others. Henry Nouwen, the great theologian wrote a book titled The Wounded Healer. Nouwen longed for ministry to be one where clergy healed their wounds first before tending to the wounds of others. This title draws on Jungian psychology where the “wounded physician” becomes a healer. Jung did not see himself as someone who accomplished the healing of his patients. Instead, Jung felt healing is an individual affair which must emerge from the patient’s own psyche. He felt that the cure must grow naturally out of the wounded individual, one must find the light hidden in the darkness.

 Ok, that’s the origin story. I am not interested in Jungian psychology. *But I am interested in healing.* In my work, in my life, in my role as a mother and a wife, I am always longing to help with the healing of others. Listening to stories of mean girls on the playground when speaking with an eight-year-old parishioner, or meeting with older parishioners in rehab hospitals and hearing their honest complaints and struggles with the bureaucracy and the pain of healing is real. And I, like everyone else, have my own pain, wounds, and struggle to heal.

1. We have a lot of doctors, nurses, and healers in this congregation. And their practices and profession as healers may not be helpful in helping them as humans stay healthy. In fact, the practice of medicine can be toxic. Statistics show that rates of suicide are higher in the population of physicians than in the general population and even higher for students in the system learning medicine. All the data points to the fact that something is not right. What is going on?

 A wellness checklist or a retreat featuring yoga is not sufficient to fix the structural problems in medical institutions. What needs to change in the culture is not something I can change.

 But, as your pastor, I can say, there is another way. In fact, it’s not my brilliant idea. It’s Jesus’ idea. And Jesus, he gives credit to the old sayings of Jewish scholars before him. These ideas of healing yourself first have been around for thousands of years. Why? Because it’s true.

 I can couch it in Western medicine, or Eastern thought. I can use yoga mantras or the ancient practice of *lectio divino* we have in the Christian tradition, but all the paths lead to the center of who we are. To the core of our being. To the ground of our being as Paul Tillich taught us. And Tillich’s ideas lead us to his most famous quote where we are reminded that,

“Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith. The first duty of love is to listen. Man is asked to make of himself what he is supposed to become to fulfill his destiny. Decision is a risk rooted in the courage of being free.”

1. We are called to listen. This is our first duty. As human beings first, not human doings. We are called to listen. Doctors know that listening to the patient is one of the primary instruments they must use to discover what is wrong and how to cure the patient. It also means listening to ourselves. Listening to what our hearts are saying. Not just our emotional hearts, but our blood pressure and heart rate. Listening to our family members and those who love us. Are they noticing that we are, ok? Or are we off? Is it an off day or an off season? Do we need a check-in? We as doctors and pastors and parents and nurses and grandparents, we check in on the ones we love and the patients and congregants we serve. Are we checking in with ourselves? Are we looking into the mirror? Are we taking time in silence or prayer or centering? Are we finding any joy in our lives? If not, what the heck is going on? How long has it been since we experienced joy? What has changed? And we must seek out help.
2. Whenever I read that one line in Luke, “**Doctor, heal thyself,”** I always picture my former Primary Care Practitioner, Dr. Robert Moore. On January 25, 2014, I invited Dr. Moore to preach on this very text from the Gospel at Saturday church. Dr. Moore is a UCC member over at First Church in Falmouth and he is delightful, brilliant, funny, an artist and a Canadian. When I introduced him prior to his preaching a sermon titled “Medical Metaphorical Musings” I introduced him with this, “Dr. Moore our guest preacher today, having been raised in Glase Bay, Nova Scotia, was an early adopter of the sensory deprivation method of artistic inspiration. After a 20-year gestation, he was delivered to Cambridge, MA in 1981 for intense training in the hard science of M.I.T and the clinical care of UMass Medical School. As an intern, he resumed painting as an antidote to the harsh reality and abrupt transiency of modern medicine. These days he practices medicine and art at his office in North Falmouth with his wife and model, Donna.”

I don’t have a copy of that sermon, but what I remember is the art he brought in to illustrate his message. Dr. Moore showed us his self-portrait made entirely of skin-colored Band-Aids. His white coat was also made of white Band-Aids and on the pocket of his coat, in tiny black letters cut out of bandages, there was Lk. 4:22. He told us he hung this portrait in his home to help remind him of who he is and how he must be humble, heal, and follow Luke who some consider to be a healer in Gospel times.

As his patient for over twenty years before he retired, Dr. Moore always wanted to spend time hearing about what I was doing, how the church was doing, what I was reading and writing. I asked him about what he was painting and what gave him joy. I hoped my visits gave him as much hope as he gave me, even on my sick visits.

My takeaway is to be more like Dr. Robert Moore, and Jesus. Neither of them was kept around forever. Somehow, the ones who ask questions, who refuse to join the system but instead strive for love, will always threaten the powers that be.

That’s ok. We begin with love. And end with love. We each have a birth date, and a death date. The rest, the dash between the two, should be about love.

May you have the courage to love and be loved, this day and forever more. Amen.

1. <https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=105> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)