

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, MARCH 5, 2023

First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

SECOND SUNDAY in LENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

- One: Come to this place of prayer; God is calling us.
Come, all who are burdened; there is healing here.
- All: We have brought with us all that weighs us down.
We have come to hear the Word of God.**
- One: Let voices of praise greet the one who calls us.
Be glad together and sing for joy.
- All: Our hearts respond with hope for a new day.
Our voices join in thankful prayers and praise.**

***OPENING HYMN** “Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above” GtG 645

1. Sing praise to God who reigns above,
the God of all creation,
the God of power, the God of love,
the God of our salvation.
With healing balm my soul is filled,
and every faithless murmur stilled:
to God all praise and glory!
2. What God's almighty power hath made
God's gracious mercy keepeth;
by morning glow or evening shade
God's watchful eye ne'er sleepeth.
Within the kingdom of God's might,
lo! all is just and all is right:
to God all praise and glory!
3. The Lord is never far away,
but, through all grief distressing,
an ever present help and stay,
our peace and joy and blessing,

(continued...)

as with a mother's tender hand
God gently leads the chosen band:
to God all praise and glory!

4. Thus all my toilsome way along
I sing aloud thy praises,
that all may hear the grateful song
my voice unwearied raises.
Be joyful in the Lord, my heart;
both soul and body, take your part:
to God all praise and glory!

Words: Johann Jacob Schutz, 1675; trans. Frances Elizabeth Cox, 1864, alt. *Public Domain*.

Music: Bohemian Brethren's *Kirchengesang*, 1566; harm. Maurice F. Bell, 1906, alt. *Public Domain*.

UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Dear God, as we sing your praises,
we ask that you would help us rightly reflect your glory in our lives.
Forgive us when we tarnish your image in us:
when the love you so richly lavish upon us we distort and betray.
Forgive us when we turn from you and seek after our own glory.
Forgive us when we insist on our own way and ignore your way.
In your mercy, Lord, forgive us.
Refresh us with the breath of your Spirit.
Renew the fire of your love within us.
And remake us in the image of your Son,
our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ,
in whose name we pray. Amen.

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(based on II Corinthians 5)*

One: The word is true and worthy to be believed: that God was in Christ,
reconciling the world to God, and giving us the message of reconciliation.
All: **In Christ's sacrifice we are made whole. In Christ's life we have new
life.**
One: My friends, hear and believe that good word: In Jesus Christ we are
forgiven, renewed, and restored.
All: **Thanks be to God! Alleluia!**

THE PEACE

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING John 5:1-9

JOHN 5:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

¹ *After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.*

² *Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. ³ In these lay many ill, blind, lame, and paralyzed people. ⁵ One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" ⁷ The ill man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am making my way someone else steps down ahead of me." ⁸ Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." ⁹ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.*

Now that day was a Sabbath.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON "How Silly!(?) How Serious?(!)" by Pastor Bill Vincent

Such a silly question he asks: "*Do you want to be made well?*"

The man's been ill for 38 years! Of course he wants to be made well!

Or does he?

Or do we?

Someone paints a wondrous picture of what might have been going through the mind of this "ill man" as he sat there:

There was something to be said for the porches at Bethzatha. In time one grew accustomed to that way of putting in the days, came at last almost to like it. It was not unpleasant to lie there in the coolness of the shadow, while hale men, poor unfortunates, were toiling and perspiring out in the heat and glare. No doubt health is a great matter; yet, on the whole, this will do well enough for me. (Arthur J. Gossip, "Exposition," Interpreter's Bible, 1952, p.541)

Not being well has its disadvantages, to be sure.

But it may also have some advantages. Maybe people will have pity on me and take care of me so I don't have to take care of myself.

What Charles Aaron calls

"secondary gain" from an illness. A condition, even with pain, also brings attention, freedom from responsibility, sympathy, the delicious pleasure of self-pity. (Charles L. Aaron, Jr., Feasting on the Word (additional), "Exegesis," p.4)

And some may 'milk' that condition for all it's worth.

Now, before we go any further, an important caution: this is not to say that anyone who is sick or in ill health is ‘milking’ the condition. There are times indeed when the illness we have knocks us down. And it is important for us to be willing to take care of ourselves: to slow down and take the time in order to heal and get better, because, by God’s grace, we’re worth it.

At the same time, are there “ways we embrace our pathologies”? our “lack,” be it physical, spiritual, or emotional?

What benefit do we derive from our tempers, from inequality, from poor communication? (Ibid., p.6)

Arthur Gossip writes,

Selfishness is, no doubt, a disease; yet it does bring us a bigger share of things than we could get without it. And temper is a childish ailment; but it pays. To be free of our noise and disagreeableness, folk give us what we wish.
(Interpreter’s, p.541)

And what about some of those societal ills of which we speak?

Yesterday, as we were driving into town, we passed by a school. On the fence around the playground was a big sign that said, “Do Kindness.” A wonderful message. And right beside those words was the school’s mascot: the face of a fierce bulldog.

It’s a subtle message, to be sure. But does it indicate that maybe we really don’t want to “do kindness”...or maybe only to our own kind? Maybe we really don’t want to be “made well” of our “we’re better than you”-ness, our “us vs. them”-ness. We’re far more willing to engage in fierce competition than friendly cooperation.

We see it all the time: that sense of partisanism and that “us vs. them” mentality. We love the joy of tearing others down and deriding their viewpoint. We are so comfortable with pointing the finger at others and looking down our nose at them. It is far too easy and familiar.

And even though we hear Jesus’ word to “*Love your neighbor as yourself,*” I wonder: are we so busy being at odds with one another that we end up being at odds with ourselves?

“Do you want to be made well?”

“Maybe not if it means I have to love so-and-so!”

We can enjoy our ill health. The routine we find ourselves in – the very situation and way of life – we have grown comfortable with it. And we’re not sure we really desire to change. (see Donald K. McKim, Feasting, “Theological,” p.3)

To be made well may very well mean we will have to give up some things.

I may have to give up a former way of life; have to give up my own ego, my own selfishness, my own “me-ism.”

And to be made well may very well mean I have to risk some thing.

I may have to shoulder some more responsibility, which may mean I might fail, and then I don’t look good.

To be healed means to be associated with this man who can't seem to stop stirring up trouble, healing as he does on the sabbath, which was not a good thing (so said some very influential people).

And go deeper: Do I want to be made well of the sickness of the soul? What we would call sin.

That's risky, too.

To be made well in this way means I would follow him; means I would risk the danger of ridicule and rejection like him; means I would take up my cross.

Do I really want to be made well of the sickness of my soul?

"Do you want to be made well?"

Maybe it's not such a silly question after all.

And remember, Jesus didn't ask this question of the world as some broad, philosophical question.

Oh yes, it is important and vital for us to recognize that the world as a whole needs to be made well, and a crucial component of that wellness is a recognition of that need and a willingness to confess the world's un-wellness and the willingness to ask for help and look for healing.

But remember, Jesus is standing there by the pool and there are all these other people sitting and standing and waiting there by the pool: all these other people who need healing, who need to be made well.

But Jesus doesn't ask the question of all of them.

He asks the question of this one man: *"Do you want to be made well?"*

Perhaps he also asks the question of you. Right now, at this moment, he's not asking your next door neighbor, he's not asking the person across town, he's not asking the people across the continent, he's not asking the person across the room, he's not asking the person sitting next to you.

He's asking you.

Yes, he's asking me.

"Bill, do you want to be made well?"

Am I willing to give up the comfort of having others take care of me, for the courage of standing up on my own two feet and following him myself?

Am I willing to let go the excuses that I really don't amount to anything, for the exclamation that *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"*? (Philippians 4:13)

Am I willing to commit to being made well so that I make the change that requires?

Maybe the sign of Jesus in the world, maybe the sign of his glory made manifest in the world – in your life and in mine – is when we finally answer, "Yes, I want to be made well!"

I no longer want to limp around in life as something less than who I really am.

I no longer want to be hobbled by self-obsession.

I no longer desire the crutch of blaming others.

“Yes, I want to be made well!”

Yes, I want to embrace life. Which, as Gerard S. Sloyan points out,
is the intended outcome of all the...signs. ... coming to “life.” (Interpretation series, p.80)

Again, an important note. I know there are plenty of people who are saying, “Yes, I want to be made well.” And some of them have cancer throughout their bodies, and some of them have an infection that is draining them, and some of them have broken bones throughout their bodies; and they say, “Yes, I want to be made well.” And you know as well as I do that far too many of them do not experience the wellness that they seek.

And what do we make of that?

I have no wonderful, easy answer for that.

The wellness, the healing that Jesus offers is not an easy wave of the wand and, “Poof!” all is better.

But I can note this.

We can tell by the man’s response what it is he expects: he expects Jesus to help him into the pool. That’s what he expects.

What he is offered is something different.

And so I wonder: Will we be open to the healing, the help that indeed Jesus offers? Even though it’s not necessarily what we expect?

Are we open to the strength he may offer to carry on, even though our bones and body may remain broken?

Are we willing to receive the courage he offers, even though the cancer remains and may even spread?

Are we willing to receive the presence of Christ himself...in the presence of another who stands with us?

Do we want to be made well?

And, if so, great!

And, if so, how?

We need to hear his invitation: “*Do you want to be made well?*”

And then we need to heed that invitation. And know that, yes, it does mean change; know that it does mean we will have to give some things up; know that it does mean we will have to risk other things.

We must hear that invitation and then heed it.

We must hear his word: “*Stand up, take your mat and walk.*”

And we must heed his word. It does take effort on our part: to stand up; to pick up some things in our lives that we have allowed to carry us, and now we must carry them; to hear that word, “*Love your neighbor as yourself,*” and actually do it.

And we need to know his presence in our midst. Recognize his presence, as he stands there before us and offers his invitation and offers his healing. Know his presence.

And walk. Not just any direction. Not down just any path. But walk in his presence down his path to know his healing.

“Do you want to be made well?” he asks.

Do we?

Really? Truly? Deep down.

Do we want to be made well?

In some ways the power – the impact – of this sign lies in our hands...and our words, and our hearts.

When we come to the place where we can say, with all sincerity, “Yes, Lord, I want to be made well.”

And then to allow his word to have his way with us.

And allow his love to share his life in us.

***HYMN** “We Come to You for Healing, Lord” GtG 796

**1. We come to you for healing, Lord,
of body, mind, and soul,
and pray that by your Spirit’s touch
we may again be whole.**

**2. As once you walked through ancient streets
and reached toward those in pain,
we know you come among us still
with power to heal again.**

**3. You touch us through physicians’ skills,
through nurses’ gifts of care,
and through the love of faithful friends
who lift our lives in prayer.**

**4. Through nights of pain and wakefulness,
through days when strength runs low,
grant us your gift of patience, Lord,
your calming peace to know.**

**5. We come to you, O loving Lord,
in our distress and pain,
in trust that through our nights and days
your grace will heal, sustain.**

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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**We trust in Jesus Christ,
fully human, fully God.
Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:
preaching good news to the poor
and release to the captives,
teaching by word and deed
and blessing the children,
healing the sick
and binding up the brokenhearted,
eating with outcasts,
forgiving sinners,
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.
Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,
Jesus was crucified,
suffering the depths of human pain
and giving his life for the sins of the world.
God raised this Jesus from the dead,
vindicating his sinless life,
breaking the power of sin and evil,
delivering us from death to life eternal.**

(from A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Sing: "O Christ, the Healer" GtG 793

- 1. O Christ, the healer, we have come
to pray for health, to plead for friends.
How can we fail to be restored
when reached by love that never ends? *(Prayer)***

One: Lord, in your mercy...

All: ...hear our prayer.

- 2. From every ailment flesh endures
our bodies clamor to be freed;
yet in our hearts we would confess
that wholeness is our deepest need. *(Prayer ... Response)***

(continued...)

3. **How strong, O Lord, are our desires,
how weak our knowledge of ourselves!
Release in us those healing truths
unconscious pride resists or shelves.** *(Prayer ... Response)*

4. **In conflicts that destroy our health
we recognize the world's disease;
our common life declares our ills.
Is there no cure, O Christ, for these?** *(Prayer ... Response)*

5. **Grant that we all, made one in faith,
in your community may find
the wholeness that, enriching us,
shall reach the whole of humankind.** *(Prayer ... Response)*

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 Music: Klug's *Geistliche Lieder*, 1543; harm. Johann Sebastian Bach, 1725. *Public Domain.*

THE LORD'S PRAYER (Contemporary)

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**O God, we give out of your giving to us. You shower us with
blessings. You renew us by your grace. You embrace us in your love.
Accept the gifts we offer as part of our life of thanks and gratitude to you,
that others too may be blessed and know your healing touch; for the sake of
Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.**

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “We Cannot Measure How You Heal” GtG 797

**1. We cannot measure how you heal
or answer every sufferer’s prayer,
yet we believe your grace responds
where faith and doubt unite to care.
Your hands, though bloodied on the cross,
survive to hold and heal and warn,
to carry all through death to life
and cradle children yet unborn.**

**2. The pain that will not go away,
the guilt that clings from things long past,
the fear of what the future holds,
are present as if meant to last.
But present too is love which tends
the hurt we never hoped to find,
the private agonies inside,
the memories that haunt the mind.**

**3. So some have come who need your help
and some have come to make amends,
as hands which shaped and saved the world
are present in the touch of friends.
Lord, let your Spirit meet us here
to mend the body, mind, and soul,
to disentangle peace from pain,
and make your broken people whole.**

*Text by John L. Bell and Graham Maule. Music: Scottish melody. Tune arrangement by John L. Bell.
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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
All: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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