

Scripture and Sermon for August 21, 2016

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;

I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak,
for I am only a boy."

But the Lord said to me,

"Do not say, 'I am only a boy';

for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.

Do not be afraid of them,

for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord."

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth;

and the Lord said to me,

"Now I have put my words in your mouth.

See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,

to pluck up and to pull down,

to destroy and to overthrow,

to build and to plant."

Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying

to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Let us pray...Amen.

I always feel the need to tread lightly when discussing scripture that has to do with healing. There is a mystery surrounding healings based on faith, and there is no shortage of examples of faithful people *not* healed.

But today's gospel lesson details the time when Jesus healed a woman who at first glance may have had scoliosis. Most discussions about this story assume the woman had a physical reason for her malady, but did you happen to notice the sentence before the description of her being bent over?

"And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years."

So while those in the synagogue saw a woman who was bent over, and had been for eighteen years, the real reason she was crippled was her spirit. Jesus knew this, and was able to heal her spirit, which in turn, allowed her body to return to a more upright state.

This might seem like splitting hairs, but I think it's important: sometimes our most painful maladies are a result of an injured spirit. What looks like a physical ailment turns out to be a spiritual ailment.

It should come as no surprise to us that a wounded spirit might have a profound effect upon our bodies. That the health of our bodies depends upon the health of our spirits. Which means there may be many people out in the world struggling with physical symptoms that could benefit from looking at the state of their spirits instead of medicating their bodies.

And this is an area where we must tread lightly. Each of us has likely experienced illnesses in our bodies that originated in our spirits. I say that because I think it's part of the way we have been made. I believe it's a universal experience of being human. The thing is, some of us have found ways to address the spiritual, and some of us have not.

In one of the churches I've served, I was asked for a private meeting with one of the parishioners who had taken on a leadership position. He asked if I would meet with him so that he could share some very important information.

Of course I said yes, and of course I was intrigued about what the meeting would be about. This man could easily be described as angry, bitter, hard to get along with, argumentative, even feared. He suffered from diabetes, and other physical ailments that sometimes made it hard for him to attend to his duties as a church leader. I suspected that the church tolerated his demeanor because he had been around for a long time, and many assumed that his sour attitude was related to his physical health.

We met in my office, and he got right to the point: he needed me to know that he and his family could not pledge very much money to the church, because several years before, he had been in a horrible car accident, had been sued, and was paying a large settlement each month to the family that had lost a loved one.

In those brief moments, it became crystal clear that this person was suffering a tremendous amount, that their soul was burdened with this awful accident, and that their demeanor might very well be related to the state of their soul.

I realized just how complicated this situation was: it was his spirit that was weighing him down, it was the state of his spirit that was leading him to be so mean and sour, and it was clear to me at that moment that he was going to need someone to help him with his spiritual healing.

Sadly, I was not able to help him. But I can hope that his story might help others understand that our bodies and our behavior are often a reflection of the state of our souls, the health of our spirits. That hidden behind our fragile bodies, hidden behind our complex behaviors lie a tender and often damaged spirit. And all the medical advances and medications in the world won't help a wounded spirit. That takes faith, and courage, and it takes a willingness to risk exposure of our deepest fears.

Can you think of an example in your own lives where you have experienced physical symptoms in your body that may have been related to the health of your spirit? Many of us may not have ever thought about it, much less reflected upon it, but I think it's a good thing to do: when has your body shown signs and symptoms of something that was due to the health of your spirit?

Just as scientists have an understanding of how difficult it is to separate our minds from our bodies, God's children are beginning to understand how difficult it is to separate our spirits from our minds and bodies.

Interesting that for thousands of years, Eastern medicine from China and India started with the soul, or spirit energy, healing the spirit led to a healing in the body. Western medicine is only now catching up, having spent most of its energy on addressing bodily symptoms, regardless of the cause.

Now, in our modern approach to healing, Eastern medicine is borrowing from Western, and Western medicine is borrowing from Eastern. But more and more healers are recognizing the role that the spirit plays in our physical health.

Because I'm a follower of Jesus, a Christian, I don't have a clue what that means for our brothers and sisters who do not believe in a soul! But I suspect that the more open-minded folks will simply call their spirit 'energy', and seek to heal that part of themselves.

In our Hebrew scripture this morning, in the story of Jeremiah's call from God to serve as a prophet, we hear how even before he was formed in his mother's womb, God knew him, God had consecrated him. What this tells me is that for those of us who believe in God, even before we were born, God knew us. And after we are born, God knows us to the very fiber of our being, right down to the nitty gritty details of our spirits.

And that has major implications not only for our spirits, but also our physical health. If God knows us through and through, if Jesus can know us inside and out, then prayer to God, or Jesus, may give us insight into the state of our spirits, and ultimately, the health of our bodies.

And again, here is where we must tread lightly: while I believe God answers prayers, it's obvious that when it is our time to go, it's our time to go. My dad's live cancer wasn't cured. My grandmother's heart condition wasn't cured. We are human. We are temporary, we will eventually all pass away. And when we are in touch with the state of our souls, with the health of our spirits, I believe it becomes much easier to accept some of our physical ailments.

I'd like to believe that if I could have helped that parishioner get in touch with their spirit, and work on forgiving themselves, just as God forgave them, that they would have experienced a reduction in physical and emotional symptoms.

I think we are each bent over for one reason or another. We are each like the woman in the synagogue. Only Jesus won't just help us stand up straight, we have to ask. We have to pray that we can come to know our spirit as well as God does, so that we know what to ask for.

I encourage each of us to reflect this week on the state of our spirits, the health of our souls. And when we do, we just might see a connection to some of our physical symptoms. A healthy spirit leads to a healthier body and healthier behavior. Thanks be to God. Amen.