

**The Spirit of Healing**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
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**Scriptures:**

<sup>35</sup> And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity. <sup>36</sup>When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup>Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; <sup>38</sup>pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."  
(Matt. 9:35-38, RSV)

<sup>1</sup> And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity. <sup>2</sup> The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zeb'edee, and John his brother; <sup>3</sup> Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; <sup>4</sup> Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. <sup>5</sup>These twelve Jesus sent out, charging them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, <sup>6</sup> but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. <sup>7</sup>And preach as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' <sup>8</sup>Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying, give without pay, nor sandals, nor a staff; for the laborer deserves his food.  
(Matt. 10:1-10, RSV)

**Introduction:**

As much as last week's Gospel text, the Great Commission from the Gospel of Matthew, was about going out and today's scriptures are about Jesus sending out his disciples, these passages are also about going in; that is, going into our inner self to encounter the spirit within us before we proceed out.

**Sermon:**

Today I asked Bob to show parallel translations of our lectionary passages and to ask you to read the RSV as Christina read the NRSV, from your pew bible. I hope you noticed that in the RSV the interpreters used the word "heal", as opposed to "cure" in the NRSV. What's the big deal - cure and heal are the same thing, right? Wrong, they are not, and let me tell you why.

Modern medicine is rediscovering what the ancient world knew so clearly; which is, a person is more than their diseases or disorders. People have psycho-social implications to their maladies and the more progressive medical centers now approach people's diseases and disorders in a more holistic fashion by including families, significant others, priests and clergy, as part of the treatment protocols. The intent now is to heal the whole person, which includes their social-networks not just cure their diseases or disorders. Returning the cured to an ill-informed and non-supportive environment is often counterproductive to treatment.

If you don't believe this is relevant, talk to someone who has been diagnosed with cancer or some other disease and hear how family and friends began avoiding them upon learning of their diagnoses. People don't know what to say, how to behave around the sick person, and they do not want to view their own mortality and vulnerability in the face of another, especially if they haven't

made peace with that dimension of themselves. Anyway, you get the idea. You may have experienced this type of thing yourself. However, this type of thing was even worse in the ancient world, given the state of its medicine and its understandings of what caused diseases and disorders.

Let's imagine for a moment that you and your family live in a small Galilean village made up primarily of your extended family, which was the case of most small Galilean villages. Many of your people have lost their ancestral lands due to debt foreclosures by the aristocracy after the last big drought. There are some of the Sadducees and Pharisees aristocracy living in your area and you and your family sharecrop for them. However, many landlords are absent and live in Jerusalem and are unconcerned about you and the land, only profits.

Oh, did I mention that you have a chronic, reoccurring case of psoriasis, which we now know is an autoimmune condition, but in the New Testament world was called leprosy. When you have a flare up, you may have to live on the periphery of your village and family's life until your condition subsides, as it has on several occasions.

Sadly, you are one of the "am ha' aretz", the faceless hicks and ignoramuses of the land, as many rabbis call you. You may live on or work for a wealthy Pharisee or Sadducee, but you cannot participate in their religious world and they don't want much, if anything, to do with yours. All your religious observances and instructions occur within the home, lead or taught by father or mother. You hope one day to be able to afford a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Great Temple. Your religion incorporates what one might call folk-religion, folk-cures, and superstitions, but your mainline religious establishment calls all this apostasy and you a bunch of contemptibles.

As bad as it is to lose the intimate company of your family, you must still try to help your family, albeit at a distance. Given the prevailing understanding of diseases, sickness, and other disorders, you blame yourself or one of your family members for having broken a covenant commandment; that is, you or someone sinned and this is the punishment. Your condition is not only painful and unpleasant but it reflects upon your family and its honor standing in the village. What did you or someone in your family do that was so bad as to cause you to be afflicted with an autoimmune condition, oh, I mean leprosy?

People are distancing themselves from you and your family, out of the fear of what caused your leprosy - sin and divine punishment - lest it spill over on to them. You and your family are stereotyped, labeled deviants, not normal; you are out of place, you don't belong among the healthy, and you, and all those closest to you are either to be avoided or kept at a safe distance.

When we modern folks read about Jesus' healings and exorcisms, we tend to identify either ourselves or a loved one with the diseased or possessed person. Oh, how wonderful to be touched by Jesus and be cured. But, in the ancient world there was a lot more going on there.

Healing someone was more than curing an individual's disease or disorder; it was restoring or healing an individual's social network as well, including their village and its sense of balance and wholeness. Thus, in a world where an individual's sense of themselves was all about who and what they were as defined within a family or community, Jesus' healing and exorcisms are raised to a whole new dimension.

But, there is more: Jesus' healings and performing exorcisms also had economic and political dimensions. Jesus pronounced healings and performed exorcisms, pronounced the forgiveness of sins, ceremonial cleanliness, and thereby presumed upon the purviews and authority of the religious rulers and leaders, especially the Judean Temple's leadership. The Temple priests had a very lucrative, sacrificial business connected with ceremonial cleanliness, cures, etc. Jesus, however, indicated that "sons of man", people, peasants, who were healed simply by their faith in God's power and willingness to heal them, break the link between diseases, forgiveness of sin, and the Temple cult. Therefore, let us see the common folk such as Jesus' and his disciples' healings, exorcisms, and raising the dead in Matthew's Gospel as reflecting a much larger ministry. I speak

of a ministry aimed at restoring or healing the entire people of Israel's relationship to God through their faith and trust in God's Good News as revealed in Jesus. A ministry that would have severely impacted on the Jerusalem culture and religious establishment.

Another thing I want to point out is that we often hear these healing stories described as miracles; in fact, I have called them that myself. But, I've learned through my studies and research that the four ancient Hebrew words and four Greek words and the Latin word, *m i r a c u l u m* associated with biblical healings and exorcisms did not mean the same thing to the ancients as it does for many of us. Those Hebrew, Greek, and Latin terms, within their various contexts, meant people stood in awe, were amazed, in wonder of, were astonished at Jesus' healings or exorcisms, but they were not seen as the healer warping the fabric of reality. That is, such healings or exorcisms at the hands of holy men were not abnormal, unusual maybe, but not extra ordinary.

The understanding of a miracle as somehow warping or contravening natural laws is an eighteenth century European Enlightenment concept retrodicted on to the prophet's, Jesus' or his disciples' healings and exorcisms.<sup>1</sup> In Jesus' day, there were no ideas of natural or supernatural, there was just reality. Reality on a continuum was populated by unseen spirits, some benevolent, some malevolent or "unclean", along with the gods or God. Spirits or gods were part-and-party of everyday life. And, this is to my point, even for us modern, scientific-minded people, God and God's Spirit are and should be understood as a part of every aspect of our daily lives, not just someone, whom we tune up when we need something out of the ordinary in our lives.

Thus, people would have seen the spirit within Jesus or associated with him as a good and positive spirit that was greater than the spirits or forces causing diseases or possession. The people would have been amazed, in awe, in wonder at his healings and exorcisms, but they would not have seen, as I said, his healings or exorcisms as warping reality.

So, this morning let us see our passages about Jesus' healing and his commissioning of his disciples to heal, exorcise demons, and raise the dead as being motivated in part by his compassion for the people, but also out of his overall intent of reforming and renewing people's relationships to God and one another in preparation for their entering the coming Kingdom of Heaven that was near at hand. In addition, in Jesus' world, where family, politics, economics, and religion were all one in the same thing; we need to hear Jesus' commissioning and sending his disciples out as sort of ancient community activism, not to be confused with modern social-political activism. But, also as telling his disciples, then and now, not to be overly concerned with finances, but especially don't charge people for curing their diseases and healing their families and communities.

Jesus, for his day, was on the cutting edge of politics, religion, and economics because he proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God, wherein Israel and its holy land was to be purged of godless powers, their unfaithful leaders supplanted, and Israel to become God's eternal, self-determining people, living under a just religious-political administration, and a prosperous agrarian economy and its ways of life. So, hear Jesus today not only healing people himself, but as commissioning others to heal, by confronting the conventional wisdom and culture of his day regarding health, wealth, ethnicity, nationalism, family, honor and religion by calling people back to the basics of God's will and ways.

Thus, we might say that Jesus judged the economic-religious-politics of certain Pharisees and Sadducees to be all about their heartless applications of Laws, traditions, the quests for honor-power, and profits, minus compassion. Jesus' called Judaism to heal its social-networks from within a larger understanding of God's compassion and holiness instead of perpetuating the religious politics of exclusivity and power, which segregated, alienated, and harmed people. Jesus, in effect,

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<sup>1</sup> Horsley, page. 3

clarified Leviticus 19:2, which reads "Be holy even as I the Lord your God am holy," to read "Be compassionate and just even as your Heavenly Father is compassionate and just."

Jesus told his disciples that there are many more Israelites out there without spiritual leadership and hope. Go among those people, proclaim God's love for them, and pronounce wholeness upon them even though their religious leaders have condemned, marginalized, and victimized them. And, while they are doing this, Jesus would ask God to provide more disciples, to help them.

However, Jesus' disciples were not to go to non-Israelites or the Samaritans. In Matthew, it sounds like Jesus wasn't practicing the politics of universal compassion, was he? Or, was he? Remember who and what the Israelites were - the elect of God, Abraham's descendants - the people through whom God was to bless the nations. The Israelites were to be God's conduits for proclaiming God's sovereignty over all life, but also proclaiming and giving witness to God's love and compassion for all peoples and creation. These Israelites and their communities, whom the disciples were to heal and revitalize, were in effect to be the populace of a revitalized Israel through whom God would bless the nations. In these passages, Jesus was simply keeping faith with God's plan in the Abrahamic Covenant and God's claim upon the elect.

As a spiritual "revitalizer" and reformer, Jesus' mission was, by in large, a total failure. Jesus was rejected by the ruling aristocracy and many of the people. These were not evil, bad people but people possessed of conventional wisdom and an acute sense of their own social status, responsibilities, historical identity, and survival.

After 70 C.E. and the destruction of the Temple and much of Jerusalem, the death of hundreds of thousands of people, and enslavement of hundreds of thousands of more Judean Israelites, the Jesus believing community in Jerusalem disappeared and we have no writings from this community. It was not until the Apostle Paul's work and writings were revitalized after the destruction of the Temple, chiefly among Hellenistic, Israelite communities in Asia Minor, that we see the emergence of Christianity and its various manifestations. For all intents and purposes, Paul was the god-father of Christianity built upon his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus understood and expressed from within his Hellenistic Judaism.

Thus, Christianity came to understand itself as picking up the banner of God's rejected Christ. But, as Christians let us not be too smug. Over the centuries, Christianity has done some of the same things as the Israelites. We too have focused on various dimensions of Christian nationalism, a so-called misconstrued global, Christian manifest destiny; denominationalism and sectarian battles at the expense of those marginalized and disenfranchised people of God. I am not talking about the people of some nebulous concept called the world, but our brothers and sisters in Christ, people who were living within the shadows of our churches, great cathedrals, and in the headlines of our newspapers and electronic news media. People, who for whatever reason, whether their fault or someone else's fault, had been and are deemed insignificant to much of their so-called Christian cultures. People, who for whatever reason could not or cannot participate in the religion of the elite and middle-class, like those rural, "am ha' aretz" of ancient Israel.

There are millions upon millions of Christ-confessing people, who have been excluded and marginalized by corporate Christianity and its various "ingroups and outgroups". A corporate religion that seems hell-bent on maintaining its separateness, its sense of corporate holiness at the expense of living out God's compassion and concern. And, we wonder why the church, its mission, and ministry are failing in this nation. We wonder why Christianity is fast becoming nothing but an entertaining, existential retreat and distraction among so many. However, in all fairness some segments of Christianity have become so humanistically inclusive as to no longer be relevant as Christian, and some so exclusive as to be isolated and cultic. Folks, Western Christianity seems to be imploding due to its burdensome, institutional structures and facilities, maintaining its doctrinal

idiosyncrasies, and its own parochialism. Thus, Christianity's diminishing relevancy in our nation in our time.

However, as disciples of Christ, who under the inspiration and leadership of the Holy Spirit, claim the mission of the rejected Christ, we must now pick up the flagging banner of a failing, Western Christianity. We must strive to become God's healing and compassionate presences in the lives of all we meet, but especially to our fellow Christ-confessors. If we don't take care of our own, we are worse than non-believers and a mockery to our faith. Who wants to be a part of a group that in effect denies its own? Therefore, go first among Christians, heal them and their communities.

We must be about the business of using the spirit within us to heal individuals, communities, and nations. We must try; we must not give up hope; we must not buy into a modern, idolatrous individualism, which by implication says, "I've got mine, I feel so goo-o-o-d, and to hell - literally or figuratively - with everyone else." In all our efforts, be they personal or institutional, we must not abandon the politics of compassion - feeling with others and respecting the image of God in them.

To paraphrase the words of the author of the little epistle of 1 John, "Little children, you are from God, and have conquered [every spirit that is not of God, including the anti-Christ] ~~them~~; for the [spirit of the Christ] ~~one~~, who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. (1 John 4:4, NRSV) Therefore, let us each go inward and open ourselves to God's holy spirit within. We may not have the power to cure diseases and disorders by command or touch, but the spirit within us commissions and empowers us to heal lives, families, communities, and nations. So, let us go!

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