SERMON NOTES — September 8, 2024

Is faith a source for healing? How does our faith in Jesus contribute to our healing and overall well-being?

The word *faith* in the NT: it's more about faithfulness in a relationship than it is about what one believes in.

Two translations of James 2:1
NRSV: "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really *believe in* our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?"
Pastor Paul: "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really *have the faithfulness of* our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?"
In other words, "When we show favoritism toward the rich and powerful, are we faithfully following in Jesus's way of being human, which acts with *no* favoritism toward others?"

Luther's Big Mistake
I've become convinced that Martin Luther was wrong about characterizing the Gospel as "justification by faith alone," and thus condemning James 2:14-17 as the "straw Gospel." If Luther was right shouldn't we be more like Christian Scientists when it comes to healing and rely on faith *alone*? Recent scholarship has shown that Paul's language of "justification" appears in only 10% of his writing — not nearly enough to base the whole Gospel on it! What language runs throughout all of Paul? "*In* Jesus Christ." The language of participation in Jesus's faithful way of being human. When we talk about faith, we must always begin, first and foremost, with the faithfulness of Jesus — how it is that Jesus was preeminently faith to God in the way he lived as a human being. Then, when we talk about our faith, our faithfulness, we need to understand it in terms of our living into the faithfulness of Jesus as a human being. We can become new and better human beings because Jesus was, and through the Holy Spirit, we can participate in his faithfulness.

So what does Jesus' faithfulness look like?
Many things, but one of the most important is exactly what James talks about in today's reading: Showing no favoritism. If we are faithful to the faithfulness of Jesus, we learn to live as equals in the sight of God. We live into all the ways in which the world marks some people as superior and some people as inferior. We learn to live to treat every person on this earth as equal brothers and sisters, deserving of respect and compassion.

So when it comes to faith and healing, we see Jesus model this in today's Gospel Reading, healing two Gentiles. In fact, this has been the case throughout the middle section of Mark's Gospel:

A geography of showing no favoritism:
- Mark 4:35-5:20, Gentile territory, Jesus stills the storm as they cross over the Sea of Galilee and heals the Gerasene demoniac.
- 5:21-7:23, Jewish territory — Jesus heals the hemorrhaging woman and Jairus' daughter (5:21-43) → Jesus feeds a multitude (6:30-44; twelve baskets leftover a sign of being in Jewish territory, the twelve tribes of Israel).
- 7:24-8:9, Gentile territory (wide-ranging). Jesus heals the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter → "in the region of the Decapolis" he heals a deaf man → Jesus miraculously feeds a crowd of four thousand (with seven baskets leftover, a symbol of the seven Gentile nations in Deuteronomy 7:1ff.).
- 8:10-10:52, Jewish territory, Jesus *tries* (largely unsuccessfully) to teach the disciples about discipleship bracketed between two healings of blind men.

Modern medicine gets it. It seeks to treat everyone without fear or favor. Doctors and nurses are trained to show no favoritism when they treat the sick. "I was sick and you took care of me" (Matt 25:36). The COVID pandemic could have been a much better example of the power of faith as showing no favoritism, except that distorted notions of freedom got in the way. We will talk more about that on Reformation Sunday (Oct 27) when the Gospel Reading is all about freedom and the Second reading is about the faithfulness of Jesus.

Today we come together to anoint one another and lay hands on one another in the faithfulness of Jesus that brings healing. To participate in the faithfulness of Jesus means bringing the full power of abundant life into play. To participate in the faithfulness of Jesus means that we are a community which shows no favoritism. We are bound to one another in loving service to each other, which among things, means healing.