

Getting the Help You Need

Mark 1: 4-11

Wholeness is more about the integration of all that we are than about getting rid of [imperfections]. Becoming a perfect specimen of humanity is not the overriding purpose of life. Being generous with what we are is. But you cannot give what you have not yet accepted. (Francis Dewar, *Invitations*, 67)

Healing and wholeness are always the gifts of the Spirit. They are always given, though not always received. This teaching is about finding wholeness and the healing we desire, and getting the help we need to receive these gifts.

Early in the Gospel of Mark, John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness of Israel and made a big impression on the people. Why was John so powerful? Why was he so persuasive? After all, he is described as really kind of weird and poor. His dress was unorthodox and his diet definitely not gourmet. John's power and effectiveness came from his clarity of purpose. He was not proclaiming himself, but God's actions. He was not pointing to himself, but to Jesus' coming.

We all need helpers and guides on our journey to become whole – that is, to discover and become who we are and do what we do. John the Baptist was one of these helpers for Jesus. We know very little about John except that he emerged in the tradition of the desert prophets of Israel's exile. They gave him his strength and vision. From John, Jesus found strength and clarity of purpose. Through John, Jesus also gained some credibility and a few disciples.

John fulfilled his own sense of purpose through Jesus and Jesus also got what he needed in relationship with John. Mark's gospel says that Jesus' baptism was the moment when he recognized his unique relationship with God.

Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. The moment he came out of the water, he saw the sky split open and God's Spirit, looking like a dove, come down on him. Along with the Spirit, a voice: "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life." (Mark 1: 9-11, Message)

The voice of the Spirit was not a statement for everyone. It was just for Jesus alone. Jesus got what he need in relationship with God – clarity of his identity, who he was, and unconditional acceptance.

John came proclaiming the coming *Kingdom of God* and teaching about a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. For John, it was the life-change that led to forgiveness. We need to stop and examine that sentence or else, we'll come away with the wrong idea about John's message and, by extension, Jesus' message.

What forgiveness was John talking about? What is this life change that leads to forgiveness? The New Testament tells us time and time again that God's forgiveness is already accomplished. Through Jesus, the way of reconciliation is prepared and freely offered. God's forgiveness and acceptance of us is not conditional.

The forgiveness that is lacking most often is our forgiveness of each other, of God, and of ourselves. This is the life-change that leads to forgiveness: that we accept ourselves as loved and accepted by God. The Christian faith promises that, in Christ, God and humanity are reconciled – made one. There is wholeness in our existence. We are one with God and one with each other, even though the state of the world and our own actions so often belie that truth. Wholeness does not come as a result of our pursuit and acquisition of perfection, however. It is not a matter of being flawless and without fault. We are loved by God just as we are. We are challenged by God to love and accept each other and ourselves as we are.

Wholeness means loving each other and loving ourselves in our very brokenness. This is grace: unmerited and unexpected acceptance of us -- who we are and as we are. The motivation we have for growth and putting together the broken pieces of our lives, our relationships, and our world comes, not from the need to please or earn acceptance. This motivation does not come as the result of seeing ourselves as essentially unworthy. We are motivated to grow and to achieve as the result of being loved and accepted. Theologian Paul Tillich wrote concerning grace that it was “as though a voice were saying, ‘You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!’” (Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Penguin, 1962)

Most of us have read books with titles like *Getting What You Want from Life*. The first step in getting what you want is *knowing* what you want. Some people seem to know exactly what they want and go after it -- sometimes ruthlessly. Most of us have a vague sense that we want to be fulfilled and happy. So, we try to do what we have been taught is right and then we expect that what we want will just come. Then, we’re usually surprised and disappointed when it doesn’t. I believe most of us -- all of us at some level -- want a sense of healing and wholeness, and a sense of peace with universe. “For most of us healing is more like coming to some sort of terms with our wounds and disabilities, rather than simply being able to be rid of them.” (Dewar, 67)

We need help to come to terms, to accept, and to integrate all of who we are. We need help to give up trying to become perfect and flawless. Such a goal just leads us to deceive ourselves and deny the reality of our own darkness. We can still achieve in life, but we need help. Achieving will require stepping out of the normal channels for success. Achieving will require us to rock the boat, sometimes forget our place, and even fail to please our boss or our pastor – sometimes. God invites us to grow up, to move beyond the children we often feel like inside. “God’s personal calling to you will always involve some kind of risk-taking and stepping out of line.” (Dewar, 68)

Here is some help in the form of a few questions.

- “What about yourself do you find it most difficult to accept or feel limited by?”
- Is it possible for you to embrace it?
- Is there someone whose wisdom you trust who could help you find a way to embrace this part of yourself? (Dewar, 68)

What do you need from church? When Jesus encountered someone in need of healing, his first question was “Do you want to be healed?” We major in questions at Crossroads Church. The most important question is probably, “what do I want?” That is the God question: what God asks of us. Do we want healing? Do we want growth? Support?

The purpose and potential of the Church lies in responding to the need of world and the local community – in our responding to the needs of each other. I had the opportunity to attend a workshop this week to set the 2009 agenda for the Metro Organization for Racial and Economic Equity (MORE²). The speaker was Mike Kruglik, one of the men who helped train Barack Obama as a community organizer in Chicago.

Some of what he taught I already knew and practice. This includes the importance of being present, of creating space for others to be themselves, listening, and learning. I learned something new: that selflessness is probably a bigger problem for most of us than is selfishness. We need to love ourselves as the foundation for loving others. Acting in our own self-interest does not mean exploiting someone else for our gain, but to “look them in the eye, tell them the truth, and shake hands to work in together.” (Mike Kruglik)

Some of what he taught were things I knew, but do not practice. These including the importance of knowing what I want, acting in my own self-interest, and embracing power – the power to change rather than the power to exploit. It takes love and power working together to bring justice. Love without power tends to be just sentimental. Power without love can be oppressive.

Crossroads Church has a vision to bring about healing and a sense of wholeness in the world by living on the journey with integrity and compassion. We encourage questions. We value the wisdom of each person. Do you believe in what we are trying to do as church? If we believe in what we’re doing, then we need to work together to bring that vision to reality.

The next two weekends, our congregation is presenting a musical play, *The Cotton Patch Gospel*. It’s a powerful and enjoyable contemporary setting of the Jesus story and you know pretty much everyone who will be in it. In addition, however, this represents a chance to invite people into this building to touch the life of our congregation, to discover our vision, and maybe to join our work. The more people who join us, the greater will be our ability to bring the vision we see of bring healing and wholeness into reality in the world.

At one point, in the *Cottonpatch Gospel*, Jesus prays for his disciples, asking God to “make this crew I’m sending out like a team, a unit, one...and maybe the world will come together.” Just who is going to bring the world together, help it find healing? We are – God working through us. That is not because we’re better than anyone else, but because we’re passionately committed to the vision we see. If it is not our vision of what the world can be that becomes the reality, then it will be someone else’s vision will. I

believe in the vision we are seeing of the oneness of all people, the presence of all of us in God, and the acceptance of all people by God.

I want that vision to shape the church and the world. Starting today, I invite and challenge you to live more generously with yourselves. Begin to find God's dream for your life. Let it become the vision you see for yourself. Get the help you need as you work to make your vision your reality. I also challenge and encourage this congregation to believe in God's dream for us -- our shared vision. Invite your friends and neighbors to come with you so that we can work together with love and power to make it real the vision reality in Jesus' name.