

From the first human beings to breathe air and live to the youngest child conceived in this very moment, the simplest need and desire is to be ok. Isn't that what you need and desire today? To know that you are going to be, ok? To know that your loved ones are going to be, ok? At the beginning of each day, we would love nothing more than to be good and maybe even great each day, but when life happens and challenges arise, which they will no matter how much we prepare or how much bubble wrap we use, I think what we all need and desire is the assurance that everything is going to be ok; that despite us and other human beings, our choices and temptation to control, worries and fears, bumps and bruises and needle sticks and lockdowns, we will survive and be ok.

More specifically, we all have a need and desire for well-being. In scripture, the word God has passed on through the centuries for us to use for well-being is *shalom*. We often know *shalom* as a word meaning "peace," but it is not simply an absence of war or violence, although that kind of "peace" would be great too. To need and desire and offer someone *shalom* is "peace," but it also includes a deeper level of "peace": well-being. Praying for *shalom*, praying for peace, (and I have seen some of your prayer requests lately) is ultimately praying for someone's well-being. For the world's well-being. For your family member or friend's well-being.

The good news for us and all people, today and every day, is that God wants this too. God is in the business of *shalom* more so than anyone and we can count on God for our peace and well-being. We can count on God for our ok.

Repeat: God cared. God heard. God came in faith. God came in hope. God was not unchanging or unresponsive but compassionate and merciful.

These kingdom stories worth retelling today are two particularly rich and provocative examples of God's power (love, peace, healing) at work among us and they teach us at least three things:

1. that the power of faith knows no boundaries (God's love expands beyond all barriers)
2. that Jesus, God's anointed is understood by those who truly have faith
3. that Jesus' mission to love and heal all reveals God's plan for salvation and attests to God's unlimited power of redemption (social conventions should not stand in the way of helping those in need).

The Syrophenician woman had everything going against her when she pushed her way into Jesus' presence. In that time, it was nothing short of a miracle for her to get to Jesus. Despite the odds and cultural barriers, this woman does approach Jesus. She is driven by something more powerful than protocol; she is desperately afraid for her daughter's life. Her acts reveal a

faith in Jesus' willingness to notice her, hear her, and act according to Jesus' will. Her acts reveal a faith in Jesus' power to heal and make things ok when they were not.

The deaf man was considered good for nothing. Not only could he not hear, but he couldn't talk either. To the beliefs of that society, he must have done something to deserve it. Either he did or his parents did. This meant he was outcast and deemed unworthy. He was not ok. But the acts of others to lead him to Jesus reveal a faith in Jesus' willingness to notice him, hear him, and act according to Jesus' will. The acts of others to lead him to Jesus reveal a faith in Jesus' power to heal and make things ok when they were not.

Despite the rules of thumb established by society in that day. Despite the cultural divisions, religious beliefs, and holiness codes. Despite the individual faith of the daughter or the deaf man, because these stories don't tell us too much about that, Jesus' actions illustrated that a "worthless, Gentile girl whose mind was devoured by a demon" and a "good for nothing deaf man who couldn't even speak clearly" were indeed children of God to be embraced and valued.

We all are. You are a child of God to be embraced and valued. You. You. You. The person sitting next to you right now. Your spouse, no matter what they said or didn't say last night. Your child. Each of your children, even the one who pushes every button you have. Your friend, just having received the most traumatic news he/she could have ever imagined. The boy or girl at school who smells different, looks different, sounds different, or learns different. All are indeed children of God to be embraced and valued. All are indeed in need and desire to be ok, to be at peace, to have well-being; to be filled with love, joy, and hope.

This week as I found myself reading to Ella Grace before bed, we had just finished reading Genesis and I asked her where she wanted to turn to next. She asked if we could just keep going. At the start of Exodus, I read how Pharoah was causing oppression upon the Hebrew people. Pharoah was threatened by the strength and number of the Hebrews and came up with several ways to beat them down- enslave them. In Exodus 3, starting at verse 7, we read that God said to Moses "I have observed the misery of my people in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey." The cry of the people got to God. God saw the oppression taking place. God responded.

This week as we sat around a table together for lunch at Westminster Canterbury, I began a time of devotion with some fun questions like would you rather slide down rainbows or jump on clouds? We had a good laugh with the variety of answers. And then I opened the bible to read Psalm 139 which says, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up.... Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your

presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.... If the wind takes me to the farthest limits of the sea... or I am amid darkness... you are there." God sees. God hears. God is there.

More good news for us today and every day, is that "nothing can separate us from the love of God." This saying and truth in faith is found in Romans 8 when the apostle Paul is trying to get the new Christian churches in Rome to understand the assurance of God's love, peace, and hope. He tells them something radical amid their circumstances. He tells them there is more. He tells them that because of their faith in God they will be ok. How? Why? "Nothing at all can separate us from the love of God!!!" Yes, someday in heaven when all the darkness has been overcome certainly, but also now, as God is present with us as the light in the darkness.

Having been beaten and imprisoned, Paul was familiar with trials. In 2 Corinthians 11:24-25, he writes "Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea."

Yet, none of these events pulled Paul further from God. Quite the opposite could be argued, that during all his pain and despair, Paul became more familiar with the love of God. How else can one bear such suffering?

During difficult times, I do not believe God is watching us from above, throwing us a lifeline, hoping we'll grab on. I believe God comes into the trenches with us. I believe God fights with us and for us. Not only are we not separated from God's love, but God provides the armor of love to be able to endure our battles.

Repeat: Nothing at all, can separate me, from the love of God.

God's good news is personal with communal benefactors. Let's think about that for a moment.

Amy Howe writes, "There are no external barriers between God and any human being: race, class, ethnicity, gender, age, physical condition. Consequently, there should also be no such barriers between human beings."

There is more in these stories than personal physical healing. When Jesus healed people, he not only corrected physical ailments. He also restored them to community. As I mentioned earlier, for many people in Jesus' day, physical ailments were viewed as the consequence of sin. People who suffered from blindness, deafness, or withered limbs had little or no status in society. They were often barred from the social and religious institutions of the day. This caused divisions to be formed in the community. But division of humanity is not the intended purpose of God's most beloved creation. God created humanity for harmony and unity with

God, creation, and one another. Understanding this, we learn that anything causing division and separation among us causes division and separation with God.

What does Jesus do then? He heals to restore. Now that the woman's daughter and the deaf man are healed, their illness is no longer a reason for separation. Jesus sees beyond the infirmity. The value we have as people is grounded in being a child of God-created and beloved. It is this identity then that makes us one body, one church, unified in Christ.

As God sees us face to face, God also knows where we are within community. God doesn't want any of us to ever feel alone, which is why God's promise is to never leave or forsake us. God is always there. And one of the ways we can know God is always there is by being in relationship with one another. God is present in community and because God is present in community, we have a responsibility to one another.

One of the key features of these kingdom stories worth retelling is that the persons healed do not approach Jesus alone but are aided by others. The daughter is freed of demon possession because her mother pleads on her behalf. The deaf man is brought to Jesus by friends who beg for his healing. In these stories, it is not the faith of the disabled persons that brings about their healing but the active faith of their companions. Then, what these stories can remind us to do is approach God on behalf of others and actively seek the well-being of those who need help and care. It is not just our responsibility as members of God's church, but the privilege and benefit of being in community. A gift we not only give, but a gift given in return.

Acts 2:42 states "And all who believed were together and had all things in common." As a Christian community, we are together in our struggles. We're not meant to live them alone. The love of God can also be spread when his people serve one another. God's love goes beyond one person and stitches believers together to support each other in times of need.

I want to be ok. I want my loved ones to be ok. What then? What are we to do? Faith and prayer.

I believe that once we acknowledge in faith, without doubt, that there are no walls separating us from God and one another, God's love, peace, hope, and mercy flow unfettered.

It is the courage of the woman to confront Jesus that changes him, just as it is the courage of Israel to demand justice from God that moves God to respond. Do we want to be ok? Do we want to have well-being? Do we have the courage and faith to go to God, or do we just presume God should know what we want and act accordingly?

For us today, going to God in faith is going to God in prayer.

The woman's boldness inspires us to be bold in our prayers of intercession and petition. Jesus said, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!" Even though our basic principle is "Your will be done," we must not prematurely abandon our prayers for healing, thinking they are futile.

Do you remember? As turmoil rages overseas in Afghanistan and the 20th anniversary of 9/11 approaches a few weeks from today, we are called to remember. The other day, I was introduced to a video of a few pastors who live in New York, serving congregations feet and blocks from the terror that unfolded on 9/11/2001. They reflected that day was going to be just another day- a stop at the coffee shop, a stroll home for lunch- until things changed and were no longer ok.

One pastor approached a roadblock on the street and asked the policeman how he was. The policeman gave the generic answer we all know, "I am fine." As the policeman turned to walk away, he took a few steps and turned back around saying, "You know, I am not fine." He took a few more steps and said, "I am damn angry." My 5-minute walk home became a time of love and support for the next several hours. Twenty years later, that love and support is still needed.

Sometimes things happen in life, and we are just (bleeping) angry. Amen?! Guess what? God can handle our angry. God doesn't want us to be trapped in our anger, but God gets it when anger swells up inside because the news we have just heard or the things we have just witnessed are unthinkable and life changing. What can we do? Have faith in God and pray.

Another pastor commented on how 9/11 brought a new meaning to the ministry of presence- the comfort of companionship and partners in the journey. God is a partner with us in our journey. What we must remember is that God is big enough- big enough for our sorrows, difficulties, situations... God is big enough for justice, hearts that have been broken, kids that have been left lonely. God is big enough.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the good news for us today and every day, is that there is nothing, nothing at all that can separate us from the love of God given to us through Jesus Christ. We are going to be ok because...

Repeat: God cares. God hears. God comes in faith. God comes in hope. God is not unchanging or unresponsive but compassionate and merciful.

Let all God's people say... **Amen.**