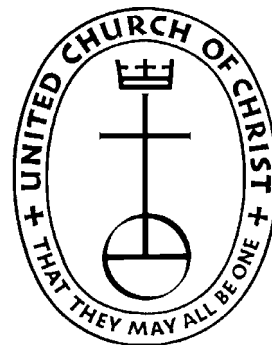


A Centurion's Servant, a Child in a Well, and Beethoven's Third Symphony

A Sermon By —
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This sermon uses three stories of Jesus healing people to show his conviction that God has no favorites. Every single human life matters. Every life is sacred. Every life is precious.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson
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Reading: Matthew 8:1-3, 5-7, 14-15

First Congregational Church
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A Centurion's Servant, a Child in a Well and Beethoven's Third Symphony

Jesus was regarded as a healer by those with whom he interacted in the Galilee. He was one of many first century Jewish and Greco-Roman healers. A cluster of healing stories became part of the early oral tradition of the Jesus' movement.

People's understanding of disease was different in the ancient world – they didn't speak of bacteria, viruses or tumors or have a diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders. Instead, they felt sin, demons and other external forces caused disease. Do I think Jesus suspended nature and miraculously cured people? No, not really. But there must have been something about his personality, some charismatic force that drew hurting people to him. And he seemed to create calm, hope and confidence which helped people feel healed.

Today I want to read segments of three healing stories from the Gospel of Matthew. And what I'm interested in is who was healed.

So the first story:

When Jesus came down from the mountain, large crowds followed. Suddenly one with leprosy came forward, knelt down and said, "Rabbi if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out and touched the person. "I am willing. Be clean." Immediately the leprosy disappeared.

In many sermons, I have spoken about the rigid purity system that was a part of the Judaism of Jesus' day. His reform movement challenged rigid adherence to legalistic purity codes. Those codes separated people – sinners separate from the righteous, the shamed separate from the honored, the unclean separate from the clean. Purity codes plus the economic policies of the Roman Empire created a class of expendable outcast peasants in first-century Israel. Jesus, the peasant sage, ministered to that outcast population.

One of those outcasts, one of the unclean, one with leprosy approached Jesus. Leprosy in the ancient world didn't mean the particular illness we know as Hansen's disease. No, it referred to any skin problem. People were afraid they might catch leprosy so they wanted lepers isolated. The law code found in Leviticus says, "When you have a leprous disease, you must wear torn clothes, let your hair become unkempt, and

cover the lower half of your face and cry out, 'Unclean, Unclean.' As long as you have the infection, you remain unclean. You must live alone. You must live outside the camp."

So what did Jesus do? He deliberately reached out and physically touched the outcast unclean person.

A second story follows in Matthew:

As Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion approached him and said, "Rabbi, my young attendant is at home in bed paralyzed, suffering in great pain. Jesus said, "I will come and heal your attendant."

A centurion – a Roman military officer in charge of 100 soldiers, one who enforced the harsh rule of Caesar upon a subject people. Jesus and those who followed him were impoverished peasants who suffered greatly under brutal Roman rule. And yet without hesitation, he offered to follow the centurion and help that man's attendant.

The third healing in the 8th chapter of Matthew:

Entering Peter's house, Jesus found Peter's mother-in-law in bed with a fever. Jesus touched her hand and the fever left, and she got up and went about her work.

Now here's a story about someone you would expect Jesus to help – another Galilean peasant, the mother-in-law of one of his closest followers, someone he knew, someone like him.

The more I read the stories about Jesus – some that ring true, some that have been reshaped by oral transmission and early church theology, and some that were made up by early churches – those stories make it clear Jesus' early followers were in agreement that he regarded everyone as a brother or sister.

That stands out in all of the healings. In the three I read: a friend's relative, one considered unclean, and one from the military occupying force. I could have read other stories about a foreigner, a Syro-Phoenician woman, or about one plagued by the demons of mental illness, or about a synagogue official.

There are other stories, not about healings but about people Jesus specifically affirmed like a tax gatherer who worked for the Romans and a Samaritan woman cast out of village life for scandalous living.

There were the central figures of the stories Jesus told – a rebellious son, a Sa-

maritan, a poor widow, a rich landowner.

The only commonality for all these people is their basic humanity. The Jesus stories transcend gender, race, nationality, religion, purity and economic status. It is clear that Jesus felt every single human life is of incredible value, that God's unconditional love holds every single human life in its embrace.

And I think the early churches understood that message. Two weeks ago, I talked about the financial gifts sent by several Gentile faith communities to the Jewish church in Jerusalem, poor people helping those who were even poorer. We know many of the Greco-Roman churches that followed the Jesus' way were a mix of people ranging from the affluent to slaves and servants.

There is a wonderful story in the Book of Acts about Peter. After Jesus' death, in a dream, Peter saw before him all sorts of food declared unclean by his tradition. In the dream, Peter pictured himself faithfully shunning that food – only to hear God asking him how he dared reject anything God had made.

Peter went from that dream to an encounter with a Roman soldier, one whom Peter would normally have viewed as an infidel, but after the dream, Peter said, "I have come to understand that God has no favorites."

That was the message of Jesus and the early church – God has no favorites.

Rachel Remen, the daughter of an orthodox rabbi, teaches medicine at the University of California at San Francisco. A powerful advocate of holistic medicine, each year in a lecture to her second-year students she suggests they reflect for a few minutes and find an image that symbolizes what the practice of medicine means to them personally.

She says, "The deepest meaning often lies below the surface of the conscious mind, and some universal concepts will emerge in the discussion of these symbols and images."

She wrote, "One year a student volunteered that he had it wrong and hadn't gotten a symbol at all. Instead he had remembered a phrase of music that he now recognized as part of Beethoven's Third Symphony."

Dr. Remen asked him what he thought that meant. He said perhaps it was about Beethoven's ability to overcome his own physical limitations. Maybe medicine means helping people overcome limitations.

But Dr. Remen suggested there might be more to it than that. She asked him when he last heard Beethoven's Third Symphony. Suddenly his eyes became sad. It had been played four weeks earlier at the funeral of his close friend who died in a motorcycle accident. The class became very still.

"What have you learned from your friend's death?" she asked him. "He paused, then said he missed his friend terribly. Several times, he had reached for the phone to call and share something with him. Each time he had remembered and felt his loss anew. He had tried talking with others, but it had not been the same. It never would be. His friend's death had shown him that no one can be replaced. Every life is unique and precious. He sat for a moment in silence on the edge of tears. 'I guess this is the bottom line for me. If this was not so, none of this stuff we're learning would matter to me at all.'"

Dr. Ramen wrote, "We all sat together thinking this over. Many of us recognized that this was the bottom line for us too."

No one can be replaced. Every life is unique and precious.

I think those who have lost loved ones would affirm that. Yes, life goes on. You can find new loves, new friends. But that doesn't mean replacing the one you've lost. Every human life is of infinite value – that was at the core of Jesus' ministry.

I am reading a fascinating book – David Finkel's *The Good Soldiers* – about a battalion sent to Iraq during the 2007 surge. The battalion's executive officer was looking at a site for a command outpost in a volatile East Baghdad neighborhood. As he walked around the deserted factory he saw a small dilapidated house close to the factory walls – inside the area to be surrounded by a new security wall which the Americans would erect.

As he approached the house, the owner came out. He told the man about the outpost and the man said they would move right away, but that they had just come to this house fleeing violence in another location. Soon more people came out of the house – the man's young pregnant wife, an old woman, a dozen kids. The American soldier told the man that they the family didn't have to move. They could live within the walls of the outpost. The family was overjoyed at that possibility.

The next morning Major Cummings learned that during the night, militia members carried explosives into the factory and blew it up. The house was gone too. He asked what had happened to the man, his pregnant wife, the old woman, the kids – nobody knew. His response was simply, "I hate this place." There was value, importance,

a sacredness to those Iraqi lives, and now they were gone.

Caryl Chessman spent most of his life behind bars. He committed several robberies and rapes in the 1940s for which he was sent to San Quentin's death row where he was executed in the gas chamber in 1960. Clinton Duffy, San Quentin's warden, spoke on Chessman's behalf at a hearing to stay the execution. He said Chessman couldn't live outside the prison regimen; he was a danger to others outside. But within the prison, he had an uncanny ability to teach illiterate adults how to read and write. His life mattered. Duffy saw and recognized the importance of the life of this notorious criminal. There is something precious about every human life.

Let me end with a story that Rachel Remen told in her article about that medical school class. It was about an event in 1949.

Dr. Remen wrote: "When I was small, there was a week when the whole country knew that every human life is irreplaceable. It was many years ago, but, as I recall, a child somewhere in the Midwest fell down an abandoned well, and for a week rescue teams worked to bring her out." (I checked on this and it was actually here in southern California.)

She continued, "This was a time before television, and radios were playing everywhere – in stores, in buses, even at school. Strangers met in the street and asked each other, 'Any news?' People of all religions prayed together.

"As the rescue efforts went on, no one asked if that was the child of a professor down there, the child of a cleaning person, the child of a wealthy family. Was that child black, white or yellow? Was the child good or naughty, smart or not smart? In that week, everyone knew that these things didn't matter at all. That the importance of a child's life had nothing to do with those things. A person lost touched us all, diminished us all.

"And without saying this aloud, we all knew that there was nothing personal in this. That not only was this human life of great value, but our own lives were of equal value. If we ourselves had been down that well, the thoughts and prayers of the whole country would have been with us, too."

She concluded, "If on the occasion of someone falling down a well, we all knew this, then we knew it all along. This dramatic crisis had simply allowed us all to remember something true. Then the rescue effort was completed and we all forgot again. It is really surprising how easy it is to forget that every life matters, that we are each one of a kind, worthy of unconditional love."

For Jesus, every life clearly did matter. The early faith communities in the Jesus Way put that notion at the center of their common life.

And it is what our faith is about today – cut through the separating barriers – educated or not educated, gay or straight, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, citizen or undocumented, Christian or Muslim or Hindu, American or from somewhere else – God has no favorites. Every single human life matters. Every life is sacred. Every life is precious.