

# “Just the Way You Are” by Glenn Clark

September 9, 2018



## Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

As Dave Lloyd mentioned last week, my mission group, Learners and Teachers, is filling the pulpit this month. I'm not sure that I would have ever signed up to preach on my own, but here I am and here we are. I'm not very comfortable with the term sermon or preaching for my time with you today, but I will share the word as I've heard it these past weeks.

Three of the four lectionary readings, including one we didn't hear read this morning, talk about healing. There's a lot of different ways we could discuss healing. The word "heal" is used throughout the Bible and is the English translation for at least four different Hebrew and Greek words. Healing is used in several senses, to reference making whole or well, it's used metaphorically for the restoration of the soul to

spiritual health, the restoration of an afflicted land, and even the forgiveness of sin. I've never really questioned the concept healing. I mean, why wouldn't someone want to be healed from whatever was wrong with them. But as I've prepared for today, I asked myself "Why does the Bible talk so much about healing? Does it reflect what people need from their religion—a hope that their God is in control of nature? Do I need a faith that promises healing? And what does healing mean today, and here, at Seekers?"

Now, let me start by admitting that I have trouble in general with the supernatural. Part of this, I think, is because I was raised in a very conservative form of Christianity that believed in the literal interpretation of scripture. I was taught that God literally created the world in 7 days, and Noah saved all of animal life on the ark and that there is a literal heaven and hell. I really relate to a quote by Joseph Campbell in one of his most popular works, "The Power of Myth". In it, he talks about how a religion's concept of nature and the divine impacts culture and behavior. Campbell writes, "The idea of the supernatural as being something over and above the natural is a killing idea... The spirit is really the bouquet of life. It is not something breathed into life, it comes out of life. This is one of the glorious things about the mother-goddess religions, where the world is the body of the Goddess, divine in itself, and divinity isn't something ruling over and above a fallen nature... Our story of the fall in the Garden sees nature as corrupt; and that myth corrupts the whole world for us. Because nature is thought of as corrupt, every spontaneous act is sinful and must not be yielded to. You get a totally different civilization and a totally different way of living according to whether your myth presents nature as fallen or whether nature is in itself a manifestation of divinity, and the spirit is the revelation of the divinity that is inherent in nature." I think that the Judeo-Christian traditions and scripture focused on healing and salvation because of this belief in a fallen nature—of

intrinsic separation from God, and that sickness and disability can be a result of sin or God's displeasure.

My initial reaction to reading the lectionary passages may surprise you. I wondered why healing is needed for those people listed—the deaf, mute, blind and lame?” Those aren't illnesses, they're conditions. Does it imply that people that have one of these conditions are less than in some way? Now, I know that I am saying this as an abled-bodied person in 2018, but I must admit that my reaction is informed by my experience growing up with “disabled” grandparents. You see, three of my four grandparents had one of the conditions listed that God will heal. My paternal grandfather was deaf, his wife, my grandmother, had a childhood disease that disfigured her body and made mobility challenging, and my maternal grandmother grew progressively blind to the point, when I was growing up, that she could no longer drive, read, or, by the end of her life, see anything but blurry shapes. What was amazing about my grandparents was that none of them saw themselves as 'disabled'. My grandfather was a master welder and machinist and ran a small business, my grandmother was a 4-H leader for over 60 years. Part of it may have been the pre-social security, pre-ADA world in which they lived, and part of it the small-town communities in which they lived, but I never heard any of them complain about their situation or what they couldn't do. They didn't see themselves as 'less than'. So, as I read these passages, I wondered why God (or I should say, the writers of these passages) seemed to. —

But I also wondered whether this concept of sin nature impacted how we as Christians reached out to the world. When I was a kid, a group from the church I grew up in in Northwest Indiana would drive into Chicago the first Friday night of every month and run the evening service at Pacific Garden Mission. The homeless men who were seeking services from the mission, including a bed for the night, were required to attend the service. This was a large mission; there were

usually hundreds of men in attendance, some less sober than others. My dad led the group from the church, and often led the services. From the time I could put two hands together on the piano in my young teens, I was often drafted as the piano player for the service, pounding out hymns on a concert grand piano. At the end of the service, after the testimonies and often a bit of a fire and brimstone sermon, there was an altar call. I appreciate that many of you may not have grown up in religious traditions or denominations that did an altar call. It was an opportunity to come to the altar at the front of the church and, in my tradition's belief, get 'saved' or get right with God. At Pacific Garden Mission, the song that we sang during the altar call was "Just As I Am". We sang it over and over, in a nearly mesmerizing chant, as the preacher encouraged the men present to accept Jesus as their personal savior and turn their lives over to God.

Clearly all the men present had some form of need. They came to the mission seeking a meal and a safe place to sleep. Many of them needed help addressing their addictions and mental illness. Thank God the mission was there to provide these critically needed services. But I always struggled a bit with what the message was of tying help to attending a service; that the assistance came with some strings attached. I also struggled with the message of "Just as I am". I think the intended message of the song is that God accepts us however we show up. But the message I got growing up in a conservative, fundamentalist church was that God never seemed to be happy with how I was. I always had a little doubt as to whether I had been sincere enough when I prayed the salvation prayer. If I was saved, why did I have the doubts I did. Why did I act the way I did? I realized at that point in my life that I was uncomfortable with the notion of sin nature, of our intrinsic separateness from God. It didn't make any sense to me that God would both create and condemn humanity.

I've spent my whole career working in the field of HIV/AIDS.

I was moved to start volunteering at an AIDS hospice after I saw the NAMES Project quilt in Chicago in 1988. In those days, especially, an AIDS diagnosis was a death sentence. These were the days before the antiretroviral medications that now keep people with HIV alive. The men and women I saw desperately needed healing. Their primary need for healing was physical. It was truly horrendous to see what happened to a body that no longer had a functioning immune system. But, especially in those earlier days of the HIV epidemic, the people I met often needed healing from the wounds created by families who had abandoned them, hospital staff who wouldn't enter their rooms, churches who condemned them to hell, and the deaths of all of their friends, their chosen family. Where was the healing God of Isaiah chapter 37? Where was the protecting God of Psalm 146? Where was the welcoming church of James chapter 2?

In my early 40s, I decided to reconnect with spiritual practice and a religious community, and I cast my fate with what I considered to be a pretty radical approach to the world, Christianity—not the Christianity I was raised in, mind you, but the radical message of Jesus somewhat hidden beneath modern Christianity and the church that can be seen in the gospels. While I grew up in a Christianity that focused on my sin nature—that focused on my separation from God, I was interested in a faith that focuses on my status as a child of God—as one created in the image of God—and that teaches me how to see God in all of creation. Jesus hung out with outcasts from society. He physically touched the 'untouchables'. He behaved in ways that were considered out of line by the religious leaders of his day. There are many references in the gospels to Jesus healing people. The book of John talks about how healing demonstrated that Jesus was the Son of God; and also demonstrated his compassion. I wondered whether another way Jesus healed was to see people as they were, and accept them as they were, as beloved children of God, and to help them reclaim that relationship.

So, how does this relate to us today, here at Seekers? I was intrigued that the reading in James was paired with the other lectionary readings this week. Three deal with healing and this one is about living our faith. James admonished his readers in the early church for treating rich people better than the poor. As it says in the Message Bible translation, "God talk without God acts is outrageous nonsense". I've wondered whether they are paired together because of how we as community can heal. I think in a healthy community, each person is seen, is accepted as they are, and, in that environment, we can heal and grow and serve. But what is the role of community in healing? Kimberly Long in the book "The Worshiping Body" says, "Indeed, God meets us in our flesh, touching us through one another, meeting us where we live and binding us continually into the body of Christ." Because the church, including this Christian community of Seekers, is made up of human beings, it is imperfect as we are imperfect. But Joseph Campbell talks about how our humanity, our imperfections, our need for love and healing, can be the thing that actually opens the door to compassion from others. I know for myself, that I am not overly good at patience or caregiving. Fred Rogers, or Mr. Rogers as he is better known, explained, though, that "Love isn't a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like struggle. To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now." So, as Kimberly Long, proposed, God is meeting us in our bodies, and God is touching us through one another. I believe that God is healing us as we see each other and listen deeply to one another. God is healing us through the physical touch and hugs that we give to each other. God is meeting us here, where we come together, and is "binding us continually into the body of Christ."

Here at Seekers, we frame our Christian walk as having both an inward journey and an outward journey. I think this process of engaging with ourselves, accepting and loving ourselves as we are, engaging with each other within this community,

accepting and loving each other as we are, gives us the strength to look outward and engage with the world, accepting and loving those we meet. One of the early classes I took here at Seekers, was taught by Marjory and looked at chapters from the book, "Called to Community, the Life Jesus Wants for His People". In the book, different authors address a range of aspects and issues related to Christians living in community. In the chapter on "Wounds", Ed Loring talks about the need to listen to people, especially the poor, with 'ears trained by scripture' and respond with the simple and hospitable question, "How may I be helpful?". He says, "There are biblical and theological reasons for listening to the poor with ears trained by the scriptures. As we learn from the cry of the poor—respecting the pain, anguish, and hell and hearing the truths of racism, sexism, and class violence as well as the faith, courage, hope, and majesty of the suffering endurance—we hear the voice of God. In the cry of the poor we hear the cry of Jesus Christ himself. We are called to conversion, to a new life in solidarity and love with those same folk who followed Jesus and sat at table and ate with him, to the disgust of the Pharisees..."

In this season of Recommitment, I want to express my gratitude that Seekers exists, that you all are a part of it, and that I am too... I've found it a bit challenging for myself to become more vested in Seekers. I'm not really a "joiner" by nature, but I felt immediately welcomed into this odd body. There are times I want Seekers to be different than it is. There are times when I am impatient to belong. But I also know that being part of this community has given me perspective, has stretched my understanding (and patience) and has brought me many moments of joy. When I first started working on this sermon, I happened to run across the song "Just the Way You Are" by Billy Joel. You may remember the words, "I said I love you, and that's forever, and this I promise from the heart. I could not love you any better; I love you just the way you are". The song has stayed with me these past few

weeks and expresses my hope that I can love each of you just the way you are and that you can love me just as I am.

I would like to close with the Prayer of St. Teresa of Avila,  
*Christ Has No Body:*

*Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks Compassion on this  
world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this  
world.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

Amen.