

Message: “Healing the Community”

Douglas Bloch shares his story:

“One Sunday morning, I awoke in a dismal state. I didn’t have any plan for the day. And without something to look forward to, both my anxiety and depression increased.

As I lay in bed, trying to convince myself to get up, the phone rang. It was a friend, Sandy, calling to see if I wanted to go on a bicycle ride. ‘Let’s take a spin up Rocky Butte,’ she said, referring to a 550-foot butte located ten miles from my house.’

‘**No problem,**’ I said. ‘You’re giving me a reason to get out of bed.’ Doug hung up the phone, got up, stretched, and had a quick bite to eat. Within the hour he was on his way to Sandy’s house. Most people know aerobic exercise has a positive impact on mood and works as well as antidepressants in treating mild to moderate depression.

When Doug told Sandy about his depressed state, she suggested they do the circuit twice to get the maximum benefit. It took about thirty minutes to get there and, as they did, Doug needed to use the rest room.

Fortunately, there was a church at the base of the hill, and since it was Sunday, the doors were open. Doug made his way towards the church, where he saw a sign posted on the front door. It said:

- **Are you connected?**
- **Get connected?**
- **Come inside to find connection.**

An elderly man and his wife opened the door and came towards Doug and Sandy. ‘Good morning,’ they said.

‘**Good morning,**’ Doug replied. ‘I was just reflecting on the truth of the words posted on the church door. I work in the field of mental health, and I have found that supportive relationships are a central part of mental health recovery.’

‘**That’s right,**’ the man said, ‘That’s why we and other church members are committed to reaching out to those who are isolated. My wife and I have found that when we focus on helping others, our own problems don’t seem so bad.’

His comment reminded Doug of author Tracy Thompson’s words, ‘when we serve others we are released from “the prison of self.”’

Cardiologist Dean Ornish describes what Doug and Sandy found that morning in the little church: “Anything that promotes a sense of isolation often leads to illness and suffering, while that which promotes a sense of love and intimacy, connection and community, is healing.”¹

I find Doug’s story to be compelling. Here’s a person - struggling to get through the day, who had no intention of going a church. Yet they found themselves on the doorstep. What’s even more interesting is that they knew what the church stood for and that it had a positive impact on people’s lives.

I believe your life will be better when you are part of a community that loves God and shares that love, connecting others together with care. That kind of relationship promotes healing, health and spiritual well-being. We all need that kind of relationship. In fact, all people, everywhere, need that. But we don’t all see it that way.

“While in jail in Birmingham, AL Dr. Martin Luther King wrote this: ‘All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.’ That’s a powerful lesson for today.

It’s a painful time in our country; a divided time. Some of the loudest and most powerful voices promote the concept that commerce and money are more important than people, health, and the survival of the planet. The focus is on the benefit of the few and not the many.

It’s discouraging and can feel overwhelming. However, the insights and wisdom of Dr. King help. Remembering his words makes it possible for all of us to continue to try to make a difference as we seek justice.

Today let the eloquence of Dr. King touch your hearts. He said this: ‘One of the great liabilities of history is that all too many people fail to remain awake through great periods of social change. Every society has its protectors of status quo and its fraternities of the indifferent who are notorious for sleeping through revolutions. Our very survival depends on

¹ <https://www.madinamerica.com/2013/10/healing-power-love-connection/>

our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change.”² These powerful words were spoken sixty years ago, yet they hold great meaning for us today.

We are part of a community, whether we realize it or not. We are not isolated and alone. We are mutually connected to other people. For us to heal and for our households to be well, our community needs to be healed and restored. That kind of healing isn’t easy. It requires listening. It requires change. It requires participation. It requires faith and trust in God. That’s something Jesus knew and demonstrated for us.

Our first scripture today, Matthew 12:15-21, isn’t in the usual Sunday rotation. We see Jesus’ personality and caring nature on display. To set it up, some local leaders are bullying Jesus’ disciples and baiting Jesus. They’re being unfair. Jesus and the disciples are working hard, caring for people day and night. They’re constantly on the road. They don’t have much money and so aren’t eating regularly.

When these local leaders see Jesus’ disciples picking kernels of wheat and eating them as they walk through a field, instead of offering them a meal, they ask, “Why are you doing that on the sabbath?” It was against the rules. They were looking for excuses to challenge Jesus. They were working to exclude and divide.

Jesus knew what they were up to. So he miraculously healed a man to show God works even on the sabbath. Then he moved on, caring for others in need, healing everywhere he went. Jesus healed people, made households whole and restored those who were outcast to their community, making it better for everyone.

But Jesus didn’t trash talk. He didn’t get into an argument with the local leaders or play games. Jesus didn’t yell. He wasn’t a push over. Jesus did what he was there to do, calmly and confidently. That’s a lesson for us today. It shows us who to put our faith and trust in.

Jesus was exactly who God promised he would be. Jesus was the fulfillment of the song of prophecy God gave to Isaiah,

² <https://www.momscleanairforce.org/mlk-healing-words/>

*“Look well at my handpicked servant;
 I love him so much, take such delight in him.
 I’ve placed my Spirit on him;
 he’ll decree justice to the nations.
 But he won’t yell, won’t raise his voice;
 there’ll be no commotion in the streets.
 He won’t walk over anyone’s feelings,
 won’t push you into a corner.
 Before you know it, his justice will triumph;
 the mere sound of his name will signal hope, even
 among far-off unbelievers”* (Matthew 12:18-21, MSG).

Jesus was establishing a community where everyone has hope. Everyone in the community has a space where they can be who they really are without fear.

There’s a South African concept that describes this: ubuntu.

A person who is ubuntu is someone who is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, with a servant spirit that affirms others and says, “I am because you are; you are because I am.”³ A person who is ubuntu recognizes we’re all brothers and sisters created by God to “*love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself*” (Luke 10:27). That sounds like a healing community.

Ubuntu reflects Jesus’ mercy and compassion for others. Bishop Desmond Tutu described ubuntu in this way: “a person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole and they are diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.”⁴

Bishop Tutu went on to say, “Ubuntu focuses on the fact that you can’t exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can’t be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality - ubuntu, you are known for your generosity. We think

³Adeyemo, Tokunboh. *Africa Bible Commentary*. WordAlive Publishers, Nairobi, Kenya, 2006, p. 1251

⁴<http://askubuntu.com/questions/424/what-does-ubuntu-mean>

of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, when we’re connected and what we do affects the whole world. When we do well, it spreads out; it’s for the whole of humanity.”⁵

Caring for others is key. When we care for others, we are cared for. When don’t care for others, we become isolated and alone.

I believe communal care is as vital as self-care. When we see ourselves as mutually connected to God and others, we think, act and live differently. Forgiveness and healing become part of our lives.

Dr. Jo Christner gives us an amazing visual image of a caring community, “... healing community is about holding space: holding space for love, care, reflection, laughter, crying, feeling what we’re feeling, dancing, screaming, sorting through, moving past, sitting with, or for whatever else we may need.

Healing community is not about putting our problems off on another person, but about holding space for us to set down the weight we’re carrying for a while, and sometimes it’s even about letting others hold and share our weight while we do the same for them.

In the words of a wonderful advocate, ‘Everybody has issues, and [in this space], we’re all just healing with each other.’

Even when the space intentionally focuses on care, healing, and sensitivity, things can make our chest tight and our breath short. When we know there are people who are ready and willing to hold space for us to talk through why our breath has shortened, that’s all it takes for us to breathe deeply and allow ourselves to open, letting light in.

Time in community is important to healing, even for introverts. We need to learn that while too much time around others is draining and not communal care, too much time alone can further our feelings of isolation and stagnation.

Safely going out can be healing as it reminds us: we are never really alone, even if you never actually interact with other people. It doesn’t

⁵ <http://askubuntu.com/questions/424/what-does-ubuntu-mean>

matter that work seems bleak or our personal life feels burdened, community exists all around us.”⁶

Our second scripture reading for today from Matthew 15:29-38 is a model for this way of living together in community. Jesus climbs a hill alongside the Sea of Galilee, ready to receive people. And they come - in droves. The people didn’t know what to expect. They threw themselves at him out of desperation. Jesus shows his love and care by healing all of them. And then he teaches about God’s love so they know what it means to be part of a community who believes.

But this takes three days and the people get hungry. There are families present. So Jesus calls the disciples to him and says, *“I hurt for these people. For three days now they’ve been with me, and now they have nothing to eat. I can’t send them away without a meal - they’d probably collapse on the road.”* His disciples said, “But where in this deserted place are you going to dig up enough food for a meal?”

Jesus asked, *“How much bread do you have?”* “Seven loaves,” they said, “plus a few fish.” That’s when Jesus told the people to sit down. He took the seven loaves and the fish. After giving thanks to God, he divided it up and gave it to the people. Everyone ate.”

That’s the power of community. Jesus works with what we offer to do miraculous things, using what we’ve been given to care for everyone else. No one has to push ahead to get to the front of the line. No one has to fear running out. There’s more grace and love for us to accept and receive than we could ever use up.

I invite you to keep this message in your heart as you go through your week. I was out yesterday and the crowds are amazing. Shelves are emptying and nerves are fraying. Try offering a few kind words. I did. And I saw startled looks on people’s faces. That isn’t what they’re expecting or experiencing in public these days. Showing you care will make a difference.

I’ve heard from a few of you the different ways you’re connecting with others this week. Some are taking meals to family and friends. Some are taking care packages to those who can’t leave their homes.

⁶ <https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/02/healing-power-of-community/>

A hardy few are delivering Advent @ Home worship kits to our members – if you haven’t seen a bag like this by Tuesday, send me an email. We’re only limited by our imagination.

I encourage you to reach out and touch someone. They’ll be glad and you will, too.

Healing our community begins with you. Trust God, be patient and show you care. Jesus will make our lives together better when you do.

Matthew 12:15-21 (CEB)

Jesus knew what they intended to do, so he went away from there. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them all. But he ordered them not to spread the word about him, so that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled:

*Look, my Servant whom I chose,
the one I love, in whom I find great pleasure.
I’ll put my Spirit upon him,
and he’ll announce judgment to the Gentiles.
He won’t argue or shout,
and nobody will hear his voice in the streets.
He won’t break a bent stalk,
and he won’t snuff out a smoldering wick,
until he makes justice win.
And the Gentiles will put their hope in his name.*

Matthew 15:29-38 (CEB)

Jesus moved on from there along the shore of the Galilee Sea. He went up a mountain and sat down. Large crowds came to him, including those who were paralyzed, blind, injured, and unable to speak, and many others. They laid them at his feet, and he healed them. So the crowd was amazed when they saw those who had been unable to speak talking, and the paralyzed cured, and the injured walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

Now Jesus called his disciples and said, “I feel sorry for the crowd because they have been with me for three days and have nothing to eat. I don’t want to send them away hungry for fear they won’t have enough strength to travel.”

His disciples replied, “Where are we going to get enough food in this wilderness to satisfy such a big crowd?”

Jesus said, “How much bread do you have?”

They responded, “Seven loaves and a few fish.”

He told the crowd to sit on the ground. He took the seven loaves of bread and the fish. After he gave thanks, he broke them into pieces and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. Everyone ate until they were full. The disciples collected seven baskets full of leftovers. Four thousand men ate, plus women and children.