

SERMON: "IS THAT A CRUTCH IN THE CHURCH WINDOW?"
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT PSALM 137
NEW TESTAMENT LUKE 4:31-41

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Sermons in Stained Glass – Two

INTRODUCTION

My wife is an artist, works in stained glass. She began doing it part-time after taking a class at the Waterloo Center of the Arts (they deserve a plug) She is now doing it full-time. Creating all sorts of beautiful pieces I guess that is a plug for her too. She's made lots of things

She's made several Citadel cadets (3 of her brothers are Citadel grads) She's made lots of garden stakes for Pride month, made lots of golfers, She has also done nightlights, some birds, frogs, even a gorilla Our oldest son, Durham, Leo's dad, owns a bar / bottle shop in Greensboro 'Gate City Growlers' that has a gorilla as an emblem

My favorites are the designs she makes with old bicycle wheels Point is she has made (and can make) all sorts of things, religious symbols included Now think about the stained glass you see in church. The windows in churches, including this church ... those windows also include all sorts of things.

Some you would expect - depictions of Jesus from one of the stories in the gospels, lots of types of crosses, doves and fire to represent the Holy Spirit, pictures of Old Testament heroes like Moses or David images of the sacraments – baptism and the Lord's Supper

And some that may catch us by surprise. Like what we see in our second window in this series of "Sermons in Stained Glass." Is that a crutch? Yes, it is! I don't recall seeing that in any church window before ... but it really makes sense

So many stained glass windows picture Jesus doing what Jesus does We've seen images of him teaching or praying or feeding the 5000, walking on water or with children or breaking bread. Jesus did all these things But you know what he did more than all those, except maybe teaching? Jesus did a lot of healing. In Luke alone, there are 13 healing stories

Yes, our window could have depicted one of those stories. But we went with a crutch I like that even more. It is more than one example, more than one story. Crutches are used for many illnesses or injuries. I know when I broke my big toe I needed crutches ... and I kept them. Figured I'd need them again. And I did!

I like how crutches represent healing, all sorts of different kinds of healing So let's take a cue from the window and talk about how God is healing us The many ways God is at work healing individuals ... and communities.

HEALING – A VARIETY THEREOF

We start with Luke's gospel. He includes a variety of healing stories throughout So much so there is reasonable and widespread speculation that Luke was himself a physician, a healer. He is keen to show Jesus as a healer The reading from chapter four includes several examples of this. Different people, different ailments, different methods.

Jesus went down to Capernaum, a city in Galilee, and was teaching them on the Sabbath. They were astounded at his teaching because he spoke with authority. In the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, "Leave us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet and come out of him!" Then the demon, throwing the man down before them, came out of him without doing him any harm.

The first healing story is about casting out demons. Luke includes several stories like this one. That is how they often thought about illness before our scientific discoveries. We see infections medically. They saw infections spiritually That was their medicine. Please don't dismiss their views too easily. Doing so limits our understanding of healing – that it happens all sorts of ways

Just one example. I think the Church's greatest healing ministries aren't just the hospitals we have built. I was born in Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte, NC. I am convinced that the greatest healing ministry we've been a part of isn't even a ministry of the church. It is the programs so many churches have meeting in their buildings (every church I've served). 12 step groups!

A long-time church member in North Carolina helped put it into perspective, and put me in my place (which he rather enjoyed doing) when he told me "I learned more about forgiveness in one AA meeting than in a lifetime of going to church." Maybe a bit hyperbolic. But still very true.

Jesus is casting out all sorts of demons in church buildings all over not with religious services but with fellow travelers on the road to recovery with a higher power, with 12 steps, with meetings

An addiction can feel like a demon inside. So too can an illness I've learned not to be uppity about how the people of Jesus' time described illness And I've learned not to be uppity about one struggle or illness over another Whatever it is, however we describe it ... it still hurts And Jesus still speaks to it, touches it, heals it according to his will and wisdom

That healing takes many forms. It may well be a miracle, a drastic change that leaves the doctors speechless. It may be finding a way to live with it to adapt, to overcome – to be defined by something more than what ails us Healing can be many things ... from exorcism to exercise.

SINGULAR & PLURAL

That is the first thing I want you to see in that window and hear in these verses
Jesus is active doing lots of healing in lots of ways, in the bible and in our lives
Just as there are many different types of healing therefore our definitions
of healing need to be pretty big, it helps to know healing is singular ... and plural

When the bible talks about healing, when our forebearers in this place for everyone
decided to put a crutch in the stained glass window ... they were not just thinking
of healing stories being just one person's story. Healing is a people's story
Individuals need healing. Communities need healing. Countries need healing

Our Old Testament lesson comes to us from a country's cry for help
This is a song of Israel, a song of national lament. It comes from a time
of great pain, from the Exile when the people of Israel were uprooted
Jerusalem laid in ruins. The people captive in a foreign land.

**By the rivers of Babylon - there we sat down, and there we wept when
we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps.
For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked
for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"**

We as a nation are so very fortunate not to have known that depth of pain
Yes, we have known pain especially during the Civil War
Yes, some Americans have known this pain in particular
Enslaved people and their descendants could sing this same song.
Their captors made the same demands, "Sing for me. Dance for me, boy!"

We have not known the same pain. But we know what it means to hurt together,
to grieve together like we did after the Twin Towers went down on Sept. 11
We know we need healing today. January 6th and how some explain it away
as legitimate political discourse or compare it to a tourist visit make that clear
We as a country need healing.

I don't want to dwell on that point too much. I think it is obvious we need healing
and that we need to think of healing as something that is both particular and plural.
The plural need for healing is evident in groups large and small
In families, in churches, in countries

I've done lots of works with churches in need of healing, churches in conflict.
It is painful hearing church folks talk bad about each other. It can be ugly.
I've seen people so hurt by the church that they walk out the door never to return.
I've seen people and churches learn and grow through the struggle

In the past year, I reached out to friends going through these church fights
Just wanted to listen to them, learn with them ... pray with and for them
The United Methodist Church is going through some divisions now
Congregations voting to leave, start a new denomination

LEARNING > LEAVING

I also recently learned that one of Cedar Falls largest churches, Nazareth Lutheran is also going through similar struggles – also over whether they are willing to recognize same sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ church leaders

Our denomination, the PCUSA, has been through that debate and division
My home church in Atlanta left the denomination. The denomination chose to be welcoming and inclusive. My home church did not. I'm still sad about that.

I called a friend at Nazareth to ask when they were voting (it will be in late July)
Telling him I wanted to be in prayer for them. He told me a bit about their process trying to help their members make an informed and prayerful decision.
He said that they didn't want anyone to leave in a huff.

I told him that I appreciated their attention to process, to informing and involving people
But I also had to tell him that no matter their good intentions, some people will leave in a huff, some people will leave with scars that may not heal

I tell you this because I've learned a few things refereeing church fights
Let me share one thing that I know helps ... and one thing I know that hurts
I want to tie this back to Psalm 137. This is how the psalm ends

**Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!"
O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay
you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take
your little ones and dash them against the rock!**

It is an ugly end to a beautiful song. They are asking for vengeance,
for violence, violence against children. Preachers and teachers often
mention only the first verses of this psalm. They leave this last part out
I leave it in and speak to it because it is honest.

Have you ever wished harm on someone else, a person or a people?
Want to see them not only lose (whatever that looks like) but want to see them suffer
They were praying for revenge. You ever do that, expect God to deliver it
on your behalf? Jonah did. This psalmist did

Here is what I've seen help people through divisive times – honesty and humility
I've seen it in churches, where people really listen to and learn from each other
I've seen it when people humbly, honestly take time to notice the logs
in their own eyes and not be so fixated on the splinters in another's eye

We've been very involved with a church in Bihembe, Rwanda
That's an example of a country that has worked on healing after the horror
and brutality of the atrocities from the war fought amongst themselves
They have done so and continue to do so by being honest, humble

SUMMARY

Honesty and humility are the most helpful things we can do to heal the hurt of divisions
How have you been healed by someone's honesty and humility.
How might your honesty and humility make things better
amidst the divisions of the day?

These things work. I've seen it with my own eyes, my log infected eyes
You want to be part of the healing that Jesus is doing?
Start with honesty and humility and by tending to the log in your eye first

And you know what doesn't work? What makes things worse, much worse?
Revenge! Yes, they prayed for it, longed for it. But as was the case with Jonah,
God didn't answer their prayer by doing what they wanted.
The exile ended not with Israel defeating their enemy.
It ended with mercy being shown by that enemy.

Jesus is at work in many ways healing a broken world
Lots of ways, lots. With mercy ... Yes. With revenge ... NO
We are a dangerously divided people.
We need healing. We need crutches

I think a crutch makes great church symbol, worthy of stained glass
Crutches are used to help us heal, recover
They are not meant to be used as weapons