

"The Healing Power of Christ: Who do You Trust?"

II Chronicles 16:11-14
January 16, 2011

Matthew 8:5-13
St. James UCC

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In our two scripture lessons this morning we find two very different levels of faith, and two very different results.

When Asa first became King of Judah he had great enthusiasm and sought to follow God. The early years of his reign were marked by reform, as the nation sought to be more faithful in following God's commands. Zerah "the Ethiopian" was attacking Israel. His army was much stronger than theirs, but God brought the Israelites a miraculous victory. After the Israelite army repulsed the attack of Zerah, Asa was so moved that he led the people in a revival in which they renewed their covenant with God.

It was later in Asa's reign that things began to change. When hostility broke out between Israel and Judah, Asa wasn't ready to trust in God. Instead he put his trust in the Syrians and the power of their army, making an alliance with them and paying them a great deal of money to attack Israel. When Hanani the prophet criticized this lack of faith, Asa became enraged. He put Hanani in prison and would not relent, and of course he would not turn back to God as Hanani was calling him to do.

In our text we hear how Asa was crippled by a severe foot disease. Even in the midst of this trauma, he would not turn to God, and so we're told that the best medical care available could not heal him, and two years later he died.

Asa's problem with gout, or whatever the foot ailment might have been, was a commentary not just on the state of his physical health, but perhaps even more strongly on the state of his spiritual health. Asa had turned away from God. Here in our text we find his body starting to have ailments that the doctors and medical practitioners of the day were unable to heal. Those physical ailments are symptomatic of an even more serious disease - the disease of the spirit that had caused Asa to turn away from God and kept him from turning back to his Creator, no matter what the cost.

Contrast that with the faith of the Roman officer in our text from the gospel of Matthew. We're told that he had a servant who was sick, unable to move and suffering terribly. The Roman officer comes to Jesus seeking healing for his servant. Now this was not an uncommon occurrence. The gospels record many accounts of people who came to Jesus seeking healing for themselves or bringing friends who needed to be healed. There are only a few cases recorded of people who sought healing for someone who was not there, and what's particularly unusual and powerful in this particular case is that the Roman officer did not ask or expect Jesus to go to his servant. His faith was strong enough that he knew that all Jesus needed to do was to speak the word, and the healing would take place.

Think about that for a moment. This man is a Roman soldier, an officer, not an Israelite. He is a foreigner, not a follower. No name is given, indicating that he wasn't particularly well known by the followers of Christ and so his name would carry no significance. He was not someone who had been following Jesus, carefully listening and learning, and building his faith. In fact as you know, the Roman armies were not welcome in Israel. The people did not want them there at all. They were despised and hated. This Roman officer had not come because of the warmth of the welcome he had found in Israel or even among the followers of Jesus.

Yet come he did, and come with great faith. He believed not only that his servant would be healed, but that Jesus could do it just by ordering that it be done. He didn't need or want great fanfare. He didn't feel worthy to even ask Jesus to come to his home to heal the servant. But he did believe. His faith was strong, and the healing took place as a result of his faith.

So often in the scriptures we find that connection between healing and faith. We find it in part because our faith does have an impact on our physical health and well-being. A strong faith can help with our physical well-being. The two are not totally unrelated as people so often separate them today.

At the same time we know that physical and spiritual well-being are very different things. We can have a healthy body and a sick spirit or vice versa. The state of our physical health can be very different from the state of our spiritual health, and yet our spiritual health and well-being does have an impact on how our body heals and how it responds to some of the unhealthy things that we're surrounded with.

One very real danger that we face in our society is for people to focus solely on the state of their physical health, while ignoring their spiritual well being. The scriptures often remind us that our need for healing is far more than physical. Yes we have physical ailments that can be inconvenient and painful and even life-threatening, but all of that is not ultimately the most important issue in our lives. Physical ailments are something that we deal with in this life, for the years that we are here, but the scriptures remind us that far more important is the health of our relationship with God. If our spiritual health is bad, then we suffer far more seriously, far more deeply, and we suffer for an eternity. So the issue that Jesus often raises for us is the issue of faith - of our willingness to trust in God.

There's a story about a little boy who climbed an old apple tree. His dad stood below watching him as he climbed. As he got up a ways he found that the limbs were rotten and they began to break under his weight. He tried to step onto others, and they too gave way. Seeing his plight, his father called up, "Jump, and I'll catch you." The boy looked for a moment, and then as more limbs began breaking, he said, "Shall I let go of everything, Daddy, and trust you?"

How like the challenge that God poses for us in the living of our lives. So often we're looking for our source of security in the money that we have in the bank or in our homes or our jobs or even our families or our health. In the midst of that God is calling to us saying, "let go, trust me". We know that while the other forms of security can be satisfying for a while, none of them are lasting. We're like King Asa when he felt the threat from the King of Israel. The Syrians seemed strong and willing to help. Their

armies were powerful. Somehow it seemed easier to trust in the might of their arms than in God. For the right price the Syrian armies would attack when and where he wanted. Asa would retain the illusion of being in control, whereas God is uncontrollable. God will make things happen the way that God wants, rather than on Asa's terms or on our terms.

We too struggle with that same lack of faith, with that same unwillingness to trust, to give up the illusion of control in our relationship with God. We're willing to trust when it's easy, and trusting seems like the most secure route. It's much more difficult to trust when we just have to let go of all of those branches that we've been clinging to so desperately. It's difficult to trust not only that God will be there and catch us, but that God will do what is really best, for that may be far different than what we want or expect.

The Roman officer had great strength of faith. He was willing to trust, and he did so without question. That willingness to trust, that strength of faith, brought healing not only to his servant but to his relationship with God. He set a powerful example for the people who gathered around Jesus that day, and for us. We too need to find that same kind of trust and the healing that it brings in our relationship with God.

Amen.