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The gift of healing  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
March 19, 2023  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 9:1-41

Happy Anniversary! Wait - you didn't know that this is a very special anniversary? It's a 3 year anniversary. No, not the anniversary of my coming to Sydenham-Heritage United Church, although that did happen recently. Think back. What happened 3 years ago this Sunday? This is the 3 year anniversary of the first service that we did online because of the pandemic.

Here's the image for the week we used 3 years ago.

[image: from 2020-03-22]

Happy days, right? And here is the image for this week

[image: of the week]

I see a bit of similarity there. Of course the lectionary repeats over a three year cycle. So we should not be surprised that we have the same biblical reading as we had three years ago. In honour of that anniversary I figured we may as well use the same image too.

I wonder what has changed for us over the past 3 years. Well, given the realities of the pandemic, many things of course. But I'm thinking specifically about what has changed over the past 3 years in terms of the theme for this week. Which is the gift of healing.

[image: mud face]

Three years ago, the service theme was "Here's mad in your eye", a reference to horse racing as well as to the gospel story we just read where Jesus put mud into the eyes of a blind person in order to restore their sight. Three years ago the sermon was about healing. And I for one really enjoyed the irony that for our first pandemic service the theme was healing. Seems strangely appropriate, right? And that theme was selected long before any of us could spell the word "covid".

So again - what has changed for you over the past 3 years in terms of your own

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healing? I am delighted to reflect that for many of you, quite a lot of healing has happened in the past 3 years. And this is not surprising. For one thing, healing is one of my passions. When your search committee got a good look at me, I made it very clear that healing is one of the foundations of my ministry. I'm a big fan of healing. I put a lot of energy into healing.

[image: heart-whole]

I'm sure you have all forgotten, but my second ever service with you featured this image and the provocative title, "Choose Healing". I came here expecting to find a congregation who recognized their own need for healing. Given the past histories of the congregations that assembled to form Sydenham-Heritage United Church, the need for healing is tangible here. Many of us still carry resentments from our past. We have had former ministers who betrayed us. There has been and continues to be tons of drama here. Great potential for healing here, that's for sure.

So again - what has changed for you over the past 3 years in terms of your own healing? I hope something has changed for you. Something that matters deeply to you.

Of course, not all of us were here 3 years ago, so I should probably start this conversation a bit further back. Starting with some basic questions, like: What is healing? And what is cure? And it's a bit interesting because in our society we often use the terms "healing" and "cure" interchangeably. For me, the terms healing and cure are not only different, but they are practically opposites.

[image: healing vs cure]

According to my new best friend, ChatGPT, "Healing and cure are related concepts, but they have different meanings. Cure refers to the elimination of a disease or condition, typically through medical treatment or other interventions. A cure may involve the use of medication, surgery, or other medical procedures to remove or treat the underlying cause of an illness.

Healing, on the other hand, is a broader concept that encompasses more than just physical health. It refers to the process of becoming whole or complete, which may involve addressing physical, emotional, and spiritual issues. Healing can occur even if a cure is not possible, and it may involve learning to live with a chronic illness or condition

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in a way that maximizes well-being. ... [H]ealing is a more holistic approach that involves treating the whole person. Healing may involve addressing underlying emotional or psychological issues that are contributing to physical symptoms or working to improve one's overall quality of life, regardless of whether a cure is possible.

[C]ure is focused on the physical aspect of a disease or condition, while healing is a more comprehensive approach that addresses the emotional and spiritual aspects of health and well-being.”

Or in really short form: Cure is a destination. Healing is a journey.

[image: throwing away crutches]

So if you were hoping for a healing service today, I'm sorry to disappoint you. If you wanted to see someone hobble up to the front of the church, where I would cure them of something, and they would throw their crutches away, I'm sorry to say your expectations will not be met. I said I am passionate about healing. In general, I'm not that interested in cure. Not professionally anyway.

And that was true of Jesus as well. Jesus healed people. I'm not sure he cured anyone. Take our story today. We call this story the story of the healing of the person born blind. And in the story, Jesus cures someone, right? Well yes, I agree that curing a person's blindness would qualify as a cure, not a healing. But in that long story of 41 verses, I hope we all noticed that only 2 verses were about curing the blind person. The other 39 verses were about healing. And just about everyone in the story is offered healing. The story is not really about the formerly blind person at all. The story is about Jesus offering healing to an entire community.

So who found healing? Or at least who were offered healing?

The disciples find healing. The disciples begin with the assumption that the man was born blind because of sin. But Jesus opens their minds far beyond that. Jesus heals the disciples of their limited vision of what God's grace might look like. The pharisees are offered healing. Jesus helps them see that restoring sight to a person is more important than following a bunch of rules. The crowd are offered healing. Jesus helps the crowd actually see the person they have been ignoring for decades. Jesus helps the crowd see themselves better.

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Perhaps Jesus cured the blind person. Cool. But I am far more interested in how Jesus brought healing to virtually everyone in the story by helping them all see better. If Jesus did cure the blind person, that person is long dead and gone. But helping a community find healing, particularly the healing of learning to see more clearly is something that continues even today. Perhaps ever right here. Healing is cool.

“Personal healing ... involves taking a proactive approach towards self-care and working through issues that are negatively impacting one's well-being. ... The goal of personal healing is to help individuals gain a greater understanding of themselves, their emotions, and their experiences, as well as to develop the skills and tools necessary to cope with stress, overcome challenges, and lead a happier, more fulfilling life.”<sup>1</sup>

[image: meditation vs medication]

That highlights another difference between cure and healing. Cure - as we have been defining it - is external to us. It is something that other people - like doctors - do to us. Cure is something that medications do to us. Cure is about external forces. Healing, however, is internal. It is about personal growth. It is about our own ability to see more clearly and to navigate our own world better. Yes, other people can help us work on our own healing, but ultimately, healing is what we do for ourselves. It is internal.

Cure is about what happens to us. Healing is about how we choose to live our lives.

I assume after hearing that sales pitch for healing, it must be something we all want, right? Healing sounds fantastic. Don't we all want healing? Don't we all want to live more fulfilling lives? Well as I have matured, I have come to realize that many people do not want healing. They might want the benefits that would come from healing. But they do not want to do any internal work themselves.

Often, people who resist healing simply project their problems onto other people. It seems far easier to blame the government, the church, or “those people” for our woes rather than to realize that we ourselves would be happier if we managed our own lives better.

Projecting our own unhappiness never works. Because healing is not an external

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<sup>1</sup> More wisdom from ChatGPT.

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thing. Healing is internal. Healing means that we are prepared to deal with our own hang-ups and baggage. Projecting our own insecurities onto other people is a complete waste of time. Waiting for other people to change so that we don't have to is a recipe for disappointment.

Perhaps people who resist healing would want healing if it did not involve change. But how could healing not involve change? When we refuse to change, we get the "status quo". Let's be honest. If the status quo was working for us, there would be no need for healing in the first place. There is no possibility of healing without change because healing would be a change.

There is another reason why people resist healing. I need to share a story.  
[image: Jesus did it]

"I'm reminded of an unpopular Jesus story. It's about a person who became a leper. And as a leper, they realized that the only occupation they could engage in was begging. And so, the person became a beggar. But one day, the person met Jesus, and Jesus cured the man's leprosy. Wonderful news, right? Life changing, right? Well, no. Because after the person was cured of leprosy, they continued to beg. Begging, which had originally been a response to leprosy, had become tied to the person's identity. Curing the leprosy did not stop the person from begging. The man in fact resented being made well again. The person actually accused Jesus of taking away his livelihood as a beggar by curing his leprosy. The person was cured, but he refused to heal.

Granted, that story is not found in the Bible. It is found in the 1979 Monty Python movie "The Life of Brian". But I believe that the story is found all around us. That story is found in this church big time. That story is perhaps found in our own lives."<sup>2</sup>

[image: You are not what happened to you ... you are who you choose to become.]

Sometimes we are wounded in life. And we have great need for healing. But over time, perhaps over years, that wounding becomes part of our own identity - like with the leper. And when our wounds become part of our identity - we may not actually want healing. Sometimes we choose to hold onto our woundings because they are part of how we define who we are. But that is our choice. And we can - at any moment in time -

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<sup>2</sup> Shamelessly stolen from my sermon on July 24, 2022.

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choose differently.

It's Lent. Now is a great time to choose differently.

[image: throwing away crutches]

Earlier, I said I was sorry if I disappointed anyone who came here today hoping to see crutches fly across the sanctuary. And I understand your disappointment. I've been in churches that offered that type of healing service. And those services are certainly exciting. Now I'm a bit disappointed myself.

So you know what - let's do it! Right now! Now is the perfect time to see some crutches fly across this sanctuary. Now, what crutches might we choose to discard?

[image: unhelpful crutches]

- Denial / Avoidance
- Need for control
- Holding resentment
- Being judgmental
- Holding anger
- Feeling powerless

Easter is almost here. Resurrection is almost here. Resurrection is not about the resuscitation of the corpse of Jesus. Resurrection is about finding new life. And one amazing way to find new life is to find our own healing. What resurrection - what healing - do you want in 2023? This church can help you find it. Throw away some of your crutches and open yourself to new life and to healing.

[image: heart-whole]

Healing is a gift. It is here. It is now. The only question is whether or not you want it. Do you want to spend the rest of your life trapped behind a wall? Or do you want to live into the freedom that lies just beyond.

Healing is a gift. Embrace it. Live.

Amen.