



Reading

"The Virtues of Crookedness" Jeffrey Lockwood

Sermon

About ten years ago, when I still lived in Toronto, a friend and I decided to do some religious tourism. There was a new mega church out by the airport that was getting a lot of airtime on the local news because of its healing services. Supposedly thousands of people from around the world were flocking to this church to be healed. Now you have to understand something about Toronto. It's a very secular city, with a significant culture of distrust towards organized religion, so to have this mega church start out in the suburbs and be so successful was really disturbing and embarrassing to a lot of people. We just didn't understand it. But, it also made a lot of us really curious, me included. So one night, a friend and I decided to see for ourselves. He was agnostic and Jewish, I was Unitarian Universalist and Mennonite, and we weren't planning on liking it.

After about an hour and half of singing and preaching, the healing service began. The preacher called down the Holy Spirit and did an altar call and hundreds of people streamed to the front. Some were in wheelchairs, or walked with canes or walkers, others just looked sad and hopeful and ecstatic at the same time, and what began was over an hour of healing. The ministry team would lay their hands on a person, say some prayers and push them back into a cradle of arms. The sanctuary floor was covered with bodies of people being healed by the Holy Spirit.

Now my friend and I were pretty skeptical, and we laughed about it afterwards, but in kind of a nervous way. We wanted that whole service to be a sham, we wanted all those people to be deluded and simplistic, but we couldn't deny that for the people there, it was absolutely real.

I tell you this story not because I want to explore whether healing services are real or a sham. I tell you this because although many of us can't relate to this kind of religious experience, we can relate to the desire for wholeness. What the people that night were hungering for, is what all of us hunger for, a deeper kind of wholeness that is physical and more than physical. Everyone in that sanctuary who stumbled forward into the waiting arms of the healing team, was looking for something. There was an emptiness they were seeking to fill, and for many of them, that emptiness was related to their bodies. To use the words of our reading by Jeffrey Lockwood, they felt crooked. Dissatisfied. Burdened with physical limitations they sought to leave behind. When I reflect on this experience years later, what I remember is not how uncomfortable I was with the service. What I reflect on is how deeply unsatisfied most of us are with our bodies. We live in a society that strives for physical perfection, for absolute health, for lives without suffering. Lockwood isn't the only one who goes by a mirror and is unhappy with what he sees and judges himself for it. We walk by the mirrors in our minds

every day and judge ourselves and each other for the perceived weaknesses and shortcomings of our bodies.

Whether we like it or not, we make moral connections between our physical state and our worth and value. And so we search for wholeness in healthy and unhealthy ways. Whether that search carries you to an altar call, into the gym, down the supplement aisle at Walgreens, or into a doctor's office, the yearning is the same – freedom from physical limitation and freedom from our own judgments and other's judgments about our worth and value.

Today is the second part of a six part series called Weaving the Fabric of Diversity. Both in worship and in adult education, our focus today is on ability and disability. In the class today you'll be talking about specific disabilities around mobility, sight and hearing. What we're looking at here in worship is the big picture of how we understand our bodies. What is the connection between our bodies and our identity? What is the connection between physical wellness and our hunger to be connected to something larger than ourselves? Our goal today is to shed light on our assumptions about wholeness and how those assumptions affect those who appear to be visibly unwhole. If we want to understand how to create a world that is inclusive of people of all different kinds of ability, we have to have a theology that expands what it means to be whole.

So I want to tell you another story, and this is a story that some of you will know because it comes from the Christian gospels, which are filled with healing stories. When Jesus goes out to preach his message, he often starts by healing the sick and his teaching often follows a healing session. It's almost like he has to get the people onside with him in a physical way, before he can get into their hearts. But what you find in the Bible is that healing is rarely only a physical healing, there is always another level to it. So this story comes from the John 5: 2-11:

"Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep's Gate, there is a pool ... which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids – blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for 38 years. When Jesus saw him laying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" The ... man answered him "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up: and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." Jesus said to him, "take your mat and walk." At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk ... Now that day was a sabbath. So there were [those] who said to the man who had been cured, "It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat." But he answered them, "The man who made me well said to me, "Take up your mat and walk."

In ancient times, illness was seen as a curse. Either you or your family had sinned in some way and this was the consequence of that sin. There was a strong moral judgment on disability. The disabled were seen as lower than low and were outcasts, often living on the fringes of the city, in this case, by the sheep's gate. You were at the same level as animals. So to be

healed meant not simply being freed of your physical ailment, but freed from its social stigma.

The disabled and the sick (and in those times they were the same) would stick together. They would be each other's community. They could be there for each other because everyone was in the same marginalized place. But, as happens sometimes in any marginalized community, there would be times they would rank each other because they had internalized some of the judgments of the mainstream against them. When Jesus asks the man, "Do you want to be healed," it's clear that he has internalized his place at the bottom of the rank. He doesn't even answer the question but rather tells Jesus why he can't be healed. But Jesus will have none of it. He says "take your mat and walk." And the man does.

Now this is the crucial point of the story, because Jesus doesn't say "Get up and walk." Jesus says, "Take your mat and walk." This is the mat he lay on as a disabled man, judged by society. Don't you think he'd want nothing better than to get rid of it. But no, Jesus said take it with you and walk. And what I see in this is a theology of a radical wholeness. Jesus didn't say "Turn away from all that you have been and go start your wonderful new life." He instructed the man to carry his 38 year experience of disability with him, valuing it for its own sake, because to do otherwise would have meant leaving a piece of himself at the pool as he walked away. He may have had physical wholeness, but without his mat, no spiritual wholeness.

And what was the reaction of those around him? Was it, "We welcome you back in our community?" No, instead they criticized him. "Don't you know that you can't carry your mat on the Sabbath." In other words, "Don't remind us of where you've come from. We don't want to see your mat. Throw it away and come be like us."

Our insufficient understanding of wholeness asks us to throw away the mat. The reason that disability makes so many insecure is because these are people who can't throw away their mat, can't hide it. They show those who are temporarily abled that we all have mats. Some of them are visible. And some of them are very invisible, but we all have them. Some of us are recovering addicts. Some of us have health matters we will have to manage our whole lives. Some of our mats involve physical or emotional wounding. Some of our mats include mental illness. Most of our mats include layers of disappointments, personal failures, and hard lessons of life. There is a connection between the experience of ableism, which is discrimination against people with disabilities, and the fact that so many of us walk by the mirrors in our minds and wince. We're afraid our mats are a judgment on us rather than a window into truth and wisdom. So those who have visible disabilities may quickly internalize that their physical reality is a moral failing and those who are temporarily abled may not even see that this attitude casts so many out to the Sheep's Gate.

Ableism happens when we try to turn away from the truth that there is no "us and them" when it comes to ability. Ability is temporary. Every one of us is going to experience our body failing us. That reality will become larger and larger, until we die. I think for most of us who are temporarily abled, that is terribly frightening, because we carry in us society's

incomplete understanding of wholeness. We don't know who we will be when we can't depend on our bodies. Those who told the man to leave behind his mat didn't want to see that they weren't so unlike him because they feared being infected with his stigma. Some day, none of our mats will be invisible. They will be right out there for all to see.

That is why a true theology of wholeness sees sacredness and revelation in every experience of the physical. If we look at some experiences as more whole than others, we are left with an empty shell of hope. If we see them as equally sacred, we will embark on a kind of wholeness that is authentic and true.

About a year ago I attended another healing service, only this time it was a Unitarian Universalist healing service. I was attending the Unitarian Universalist Christian Revival and there was a healing service scheduled for Friday night. I started to remember that healing service ten years ago when my friend and I sat awkwardly in the middle of this throng of religious ecstasy that we couldn't feel, and I wondered what healing would mean in this service, in the religion I had chosen. And it came to me why I was so uncomfortable with that service so many years ago. It only saw healing in one way. It was about ending suffering instead of transforming suffering.

I wondered what kind of healing would be promised at this Unitarian Universalist service. And not surprisingly, it didn't promise healing, it offered a path. Ministers lined up at the front, ready to receive us, and one by one those who wished came forward, shared the kind of healing they sought, and were prayed for, and what was prayed for was not a miraculous healing that would erase our suffering, but rather a kind of healing that would transform us, give us the strength for the journey we had undertaken, and ultimately point us to a path of restoration into a theology of wholeness that is offered to all.

May we with the best of intentions, accept the gift. Amen.