

**Jon Hauerwas – February 17, 2019 – “First, He Healed Them”
Jeremiah 17:5-10 and Luke 6:17-26**

Let's say that a man goes to the doctor because he's having trouble sleeping. This is the presenting problem. Of course, there are all kinds of ways to deal with this issue. But, first, the physician needs to ask some questions. Is the man in pain? Is he feeling anxious about something? Does he drink 7 cups of caffeinated coffee at 10 p.m. every night? Is he watching horror or suspense films after the children go to bed? How is his diet? Does he exercise? Or smoke? Or regularly chase his dinner with a bottle of wine? Has his blood been tested recently to screen for disease or illness?

The best physicians hope to treat the whole person, rather than a single, presenting issue. So after a more in-depth conversation, the doctor may prescribe the following: soft music, deep breathing, talk therapy, and anxiety medication. The hope is that once the patient is sleeping more soundly, he can find the energy to start an exercise plan, improve his diet, address the cracks in his strained marriage, and begin delegating more tasks at work. In other words, there is an immediate response, and a more long-term response, as well.

Human problems are complex and multi-faceted, so our treatment plans reflect that. And while we may be similar to our neighbors in many respects, we also require individualized care. In our second lesson this morning, the great crowd that follows Jesus views him “as a miracle worker, from whom they seek personal benefits as well as teaching.”¹ The text refers to them as “his disciples.” “This is a gathering of those who have been responsive to Jesus’ work and his call to discipleship. They have not come to test Jesus or out of idle curiosity. They have come, rather, to *hear* Jesus and to be healed by him.”² “For his part, Jesus responds in the opposite order: he heals first, then teaches.”³

Before moving to Akron, my wife, I, and our only child at the time, lived in Washington state. There, my wife worked for the Interfaith Coalition of Whatcom County, a network of mainline Protestant as well as Roman Catholic congregations who pool their resources together with the intention of housing those on the brink of homelessness. During our time in the Pacific Northwest, Whatcom County was transitioning toward the Housing First model that has been growing in popularity in recent years.

¹ Ed. Joel B. Green, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 1*. (Westminster John Knox Press: 2018), 251.

² Alan Culpepper, *Luke, The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Volume IX*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1996), 142.

³ *Ibid.*, 251.

Practically speaking, Housing First prioritizes permanent housing for people experiencing homelessness. The strategy is that once this overarching need has been addressed, and the chaos of life has eased, individuals can pursue personal goals and seek to improve their quality of life. Housing First “is guided by the belief that people need basic necessities like food and a place to live before attending to anything less critical, such as getting a job, budgeting properly, or attending to substance abuse issues.”⁴

Like a good physician or a community in search of solutions to the problems of homelessness, Jesus was a practitioner of holistic care. He understood that treatment is both personal and corporate. Both immediate and long-term. Both physical and intellectual. Jesus’ words offer the way to eternal life. But, before we can hear them, we have some presenting issues for which we come seeking his help. And before we can hear about God’s future blessings, we need to experience some sign of God’s blessing in the here and now.

⁴ <https://endhomelessness.org/resource/housing-first/>. Accessed on February 16, 2019.

First, Jesus heals them. Then, once the most pressing distractions and stresses have been lifted, the crowd is able to hear and receive all that he has to teach them. Notably, Jesus was a poor man. He was one of them. And so, he spoke empathetically about the plight of the poor. On that dusty plain in northern Galilee so long ago, Jesus spoke to those like him – “the poor, the hungry, those who mourned and cried out in pain and who wept. He told them to take heart, rejoice, and know that if they had been excluded, hated, reviled, or defamed as they earnestly sought to follow the Son of Man, their reward would be great.”⁵

Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez has commented that “God has a preferential love for the poor not because they are necessarily better than others, morally or religiously, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God’s will. The ultimate basis for the privileged position of the poor is not in the poor themselves, but in God, in the gratuitousness and universality of God’s love.”⁶

For some, this is very good news. But, for others, not so much. What about those of us today who are hearing and interpreting this passage and who possess

⁵ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁶ Gustavo Gutierrez, “Song of Deliverance,” in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), 131.

more goods and wealth than the ancient person could have ever imagined? “Because we are not poor, this beatitude” is likely either to mystify us or leave us “feeling guilt rather than joy. Like the rich young ruler, we hear the Lord’s word and go away sorrowful because our possessions are many. Our pride and our ability to provide for ourselves have blocked the channels of blessing.” This scripture, then, is a call to reorder the priorities that we have set for our lives. But what a hard lesson this is to hear! ⁷

Perhaps, “one way to resolve this disconnect is for us, the rich Christians, to minister to the people Jesus is blessing. We are called to feed the poor, comfort the afflicted, house the homeless. It is one thing to give to the mission offerings of (our) church. It is quite another to volunteer at a homeless shelter, serve at a soup kitchen, mentor a disadvantaged third-grader. Giving money is good, giving of your time and presence is even better.” And yet, this is what is asked of us if “we are to be God’s instruments in transforming their woes into blessing.” ⁸

This afternoon at 5 p.m., our church is hosting a Third Sunday Dinner. In keeping with the Housing First model, we are trying to meet the immediate needs of

⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 253.

our neighbors who are seeking to have enough to eat in order to address the other stresses and chaos of their lives. And, as always, we could use more volunteers. In his sermons, Jesus spoke to the masses, but he still made time for the individuals. And like a good physician, he healed them first. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.