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Entering Shalom

This past June, your Session embraced the idea of studying together Diana Butler Bass's 2006 book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*. While the title is not necessarily grabbing, the setting from which it was written is.

Let me tell you a bit about the author. Diana was born in Baltimore, Maryland, and grew up in Scottsdale, Arizona, and now resides in Alexandria, Virginia. She was raised a United Methodist, became an evangelical Christian as a teenager, and is today a member of the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany in downtown Washington, D.C.. She earned a Bachelor's degree from Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California, a Master's degree in Church History from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hampton, Massachusetts, and a Ph.D. in religious studies from Duke University. Among the places she has taught are Rhodes College (PCUSA college in Memphis) and Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria.

What is unique about this book is that it grew out of a Lily Endowment Grant to study the unique characteristics of healthy mainline Protestant churches. The residing question that her team lived with was: "Are there common characteristics in these healthy, vital mainline congregations we are studying, and if so, what are they?" Her *Christianity for the Rest of Us* holds up ten characteristics, that all fifty churches deemed vital and healthy held in common. She refers to these as the "Ten Signposts of Renewal." (I promise, I'm not getting any kickback for promoting her book!)

The ten characteristics that these Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, United Church of Christ, The Disciples of Christ (The Christian Church), and the Episcopal Church held in common are:

1. Hospitality
2. Discernment
3. Healing
4. Contemplation
5. Testimony
6. Diversity
7. Justice

8. Worship
9. Reflection
10. Beauty

Following the September 14 Session study on the “Discernment” chapter, Doug Baker set up a blog for us so that in between study sessions we could engage in “online” discussion about the book and specific chapters. The blog is just getting started, but if you are interested you can join the thinking and online conversations at: <http://hpc-bookdiscussion.blogspot.com>. *Christianity for the Rest of Us* was named among the “best books of the year” by *Publishers Weekly* and by the Academy of Parish Clergy...and I do encourage you to read it, if you are so inclined. This past January, the continuing education conference I attended included Bass and Marcus Borg as keynote speakers.

The reason for this lengthy introduction is that our upcoming chapter is directly related to today’s texts in the letter of James and the Gospel of Mark. The subject matter is “healing, prayer, and harmony.” I borrowed Bass’s subtitle to her healing chapter for my sermon title: “Entering Shalom.”

From James we heard earlier:

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

In the Gospel of Mark, the disciple, John, was concerned that several of the disciples saw someone else casting out demons in Jesus’ name, but were not part of the Twelve. Jesus said, “Do not stop them, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.” The text then goes into that difficult passage on cutting your hand off, cutting your foot off, plucking your eye out if any of these cause you to stumble.

Let me make a few quick comments on the biblical understanding of sickness in both the Jewish and the Christian portion of the Bible. Our Bible was all written before the age of enlightenment—before we had any knowledge of

germs, bacteria, viruses, or Purell. The biblical view was that if a person was sick, the illness was the result of sinfulness. Job is a good Old Testament example; a New Testament example is the disciples' question to Jesus: "Rabbi who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?"¹ "Neither," was Jesus' answer. To Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, Job's three friends' encouragement for Job to confess his sins and his health will return, Job responds, "I have done nothing to receive my calamities or ill health."

Also, the passage in Mark contains a style of teaching known as *hyperbole*—an exaggerated form to make an important point. Jesus was not saying that the quick remedy against pornography is to pluck your eye out. He was talking about the absolute necessity of harmony and inner peace in a person's life. He was saying in Mark's first paragraph that people who pray for each other are incapable of speaking negatively about each other. We just can't condemn the people for whom we pray. Our mental and spiritual system just won't let it happen. And, if there is something in your life that is pulling you down, you are better off without it. Your life needs internal harmony in order to be healthy. That was the very prescription for the "Rich Young Ruler." Jesus told him, "I see that you are a wealthy man. Give your wealth to the poor and come follow me, and you will have peace in your heart." (My translation.)

The words "peace, health, and salvation" have much in common. *Shalom*, the Hebrew word for *peace*, does not mean the same as our common use of the word *peace*. Today, we use it to refer to the absence of conflict with other people or nations. The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, refers to inner peace. We may have inner peace, *shalom*, that leads us to deal appropriately with conflict, personally or worldwide. *Shalom* denotes an inner harmony that enables us to sleep throughout the night and not grind away about the events of the day.

Jesus understood this more than any other. That is the reason his life and teachings are so important. His teachings on "turning the other cheek," "going the second mile," and limitless forgiveness have to do with being at peace within oneself.

¹ John 9:1-2.

James understood these principles. That is why in these last eight verses of his “Letter on Wisdom” he keeps calling his congregation back to the wisdom of God. The wisdom of the world has led them into all kinds of trouble, not least of which are the divisions that sin and sickness have caused among them. In characteristic fashion, James does not try to explain how this works, since their trouble is not in their minds. Their trouble is in the concrete acts of their life together, which is why James gives them concrete things to do: pray for one another, sing songs of praise, call for the elders, anoint with oil, confess to one another, bring the wanderers back home.²

In the case of the sinful, he recommends confession—not to the ceiling but to another member of the community, whose own confession will follow in due course.

In the case of the sick, he recommends an audible call for the elders of the church. Flowers and soup are great medicine, but they are not enough. The person whose weakness has caused him to be cut off from the community needs the representatives of that community to come to him where he is lying and pray for him.

Prayer and confession have a way of unifying people because harmony begins to replace confusion and disconnection. In the biblical tradition, harmony manifests salvation, which comes from the root word *salvus*, meaning “to heal.”³ Christ’s vision was one of spiritual, mental, physical, and relational balance. In the medical setting of Georgia Baptist Medical Center, we Clinical Pastoral Interns were taught to be cognizant of patients having lower gastrointestinal problems—ulcers, constipation, inflammation of the intestines, intestinal cancer... Often, these physical problems were symptoms in the things of the mind and heart.

The importance of our “Prayers of the People” is that rather than being just a pastoral prayer; it is an invitation for all in the community of faith to prayer for each other, for members of our congregation who are not present, for the

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “Homiletical Perspective” on James 5:13-20 from *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 4* (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox: 2009), 111-115.

³ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (New York, HarperCollins: 2006), 104.

needs with those present, and for the world at large. It is a practice that invites unity and harmony within the individual and within our body of faith. The healing of our physical bodies is greatly increased when our hearts and minds are at peace. We can never be effective agents of God's peace and salvation when our own hearts are lacking inner harmony. Your prayers for other people are not only important for them; they are important for your own peace and health. Walter Brueggemann describes *shalom* as "the central vision" of the Bible.⁴ Harmony, health (physical, mental, and relational), and salvation all go together.

In the half hour prior to the August Session meeting, several of our elders, Lois, and I gathered with Janie and Ann Hurt at Janie's request. We read scripture, anointed Janie with oil, and prayed for health and inner unity in this very room.

Later in the Fall and early Spring, the Worship Committee is planning two Taize services of soft music and scripture whose healing and meditative style originated in Taize, France.

After setting up our blog, Doug Baker offered some initial thoughts and reflection on "Healing" chapter which concluded with a quote from Diana's own observations and new experiences:

...Unlike the stereotype of healing from my childhood Methodism, the Christian practice of healing is neither spooky nor kooky. It involves growing into a deep awareness of oneness with God, finding healing within, and moving beyond the self to help heal the world. Occasionally, healing leads us to the unexpected territory of miraculous physical cures and dramatic conversions.

And, so it does. And, so it does.

Prayer

⁴ Walter Brueggemann as quoted in Diana Butler Bass's *Christianity for the Rest of Us*.

James 5:13-20

13Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 14Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. 16Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. 17Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

19My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, 20you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Mark 9:38-50

38John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." 39But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40Whoever is not against us is for us. 41For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

42"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. 43If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. 47And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, 48where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

49"For everyone will be salted with fire. 50Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."