

Willow Glen UMC October 16, 2011 “On Visiting the Sick”
James 5:13-20

“Are any among you suffering? They should pray.” I was suffering AND praying for the strength to endure the pain last Wednesday. I was hoping that I could make it through the night so that I wouldn’t have to wake Kristen and go to the hospital. But I didn’t make it until morning. We arrived, all three of us, at the ER at 3 a.m. The ice pack didn’t do it. Not even the narcotics they gave me took away the pain entirely. It wasn’t until 10 a.m. in the endodontist’s chair that I received my answer to prayer: Lidocaine!

“Are any among you cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.” I tell you, I was singing when that broken tooth was out and the pain finally stopped. I couldn’t help saying: God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good! So I have a root canal scheduled for Tuesday. Still, I’m grateful to have some dental insurance (thank you, church). I’m grateful to Hank for having broken a crown and finding us a dentist earlier in the week. I’m

grateful that I could be seen right away. I'm so thankful the pain has gone away.

“Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them.” Ruby has told you her story. Let me tell you one of mine. We had a prayer shawl ministry in Novato. When someone was gravely ill, grieving a loved one, or surviving some tragic circumstance, we would pass a knitted shawl around in worship and each person in the pew would bless that shawl with prayers of hope and healing.

Now I thought this was a wonderful way to make the ministry of prayer more tangible for people. But I wasn't prepared for all the testimonials. Recipients of the shawls often wrote back, sometimes telling of miracles. I delivered a shawl to our church secretary who was battling a severe case of shingles—in her right eye. The situation was not improving, and the doctors were beginning to fear that she might lose her

eyesight. As she tells the story, within 30 minutes of wrapping that shawl around her shoulders, she began to feel better. The tide turned and she slowly began to recover. “The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.” Even if prayer won’t always save their bodies, never doubt that it will raise their spirits.

John Wesley was a very big advocate of not only praying for, but also visiting the sick. So I want to talk about the more pastoral side of Wesley because it’s something that this church needs to hear. Wesley considered visiting the sick—whether they be sick in mind, body or spirit—to be a means of grace.

Now the ordinary means of grace, the ordinary means by which God’s grace enters our lives, are things like reading the Bible, attending church, receiving the Lord’s Supper, praying, fasting. These are the church-y things we do, what Wesley called the “works of piety.”

But he argued that there are also works of mercy, and these are real means of grace as well. God's grace enters our lives when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and imprisoned. As Jesus says in Matthew 25: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me." [25:40]

In other words, when we perform works of mercy, we meet Jesus. And when we don't do works of mercy, we deprive ourselves and others of occasions to meet God. And that is, after all, what grace is. For Wesley, grace isn't something like a get-out-of-jail-free card. It's not an invisible cloak of righteousness we put on. Grace isn't a something at all. It's a Someone. Grace is nothing less than the actual, real, you-can-know-it, you-can-feel-it, indwelling presence of God in your life. When you receive grace, however you receive grace, you receive the living Christ. The Spirit of God now dwells within you. God inside you! Try to get inside that idea. So, if God is on

the inside, how can that not have radical implications for how we live our lives on the outside?

Wesley warned us that if we have the presence of God in our hearts and don't share that presence with others, then what was present will soon be absent. Grace is like a muscle: if it isn't exercised, it will atrophy. It will weaken to the point that it can't even hold us up, let alone anyone else.

Wesley didn't want that to happen to his Methodists, and I don't want it to happen to mine. Once, in a sermon, he tried to shame the rich into visiting the sick. He pointed out how French ladies had a custom of visiting the poor on their sickbeds. Now, when an Englishman holds up the French as an example to follow, you know he means business. He said, "For many years we have abundantly copied after the follies of the French. Let us for once copy after their wisdom and virtue..."

[Sermon #98, "On Visiting the Sick," *Works*, 3:388]

I don't know many French ladies, but I've known many saints who make it their ministry to visit the sick. And everyone else knows that they carry with them the presence of God. And that's because when you bring God to the sick and the shut-in or the shut-out, the presence of God in your own life becomes more visible to others. It's called the "halo effect."

But a few folk can't do it for the rest of us. Wesley says that you can't visit the sick by proxy. And praying from a distance is not as beneficial as praying in their presence. Facebook will never take the place of a face-to-face, hand-to-hand, spirit-to-spirit connection. And you are hungry for it.

What I've learned in all of my "meet-and-greets" thus far is that you are hungry for connection. You want more fellowship. You want more face time with each other. You want an intimacy you don't have. You seem to know that you won't grow spiritually without it.

But how do we get it? For starters, I can tell you that you won't experience the presence of God unless you are present with people who are seeking God. And that means showing up at church on Sunday morning.

Our membership vows state that we support the church through our prayers, our PRESENCE, our gifts, our service and our witness. We say to you every Sunday that your presence is a gift to us. We say that because, without you, we can't experience the presence of God. We need you to be fully present when you come to worship. Put away that "to do" list. The more present you are to us, the more of you that you bring to worship, the more of God we will encounter here.

We don't need pew warmers. We need heart warmers. For without the presence of God in our lives, we can't bring God to anyone else. And if we don't bring the presence of God to someone who doesn't have it, we'll soon lose it. So we have to visit: the sick, the sore, the tired, the poor, the lost, the alone,

the grieving, those who are on their way home. Remember, Jesus didn't come for those who were well, who had no need of a Physician. [Mark 2:17] He came and we go to the ones who are sick, whether they be ailing in body, mind or spirit. Jesus is the Good Doctor we bring to them. Love is the medicine we offer them. God's presence is the present we leave with them. And there's no quicker way to make your day than to spend a few moments visiting with someone who is shut-in or feeling shut-down.

Unfortunately, I didn't learn this until I was a pastor. But I had the unique privilege of teaching others as I was learning it myself. Not being able to drive a car for the first four years of ministry, I needed drivers to take me visiting. In Eugene, Oregon, the woman arranging my driving schedule called it "Driving Miss Becky." Now my drivers thought they were doing a favor for me, but they discovered that visiting was a favor to them. They were so blessed by visiting with hospital patients,

nursing home residents, and the home-bound, that they continued to visit them even after I got my driver's license and didn't need them any longer.

You don't need a pastor who needs a driver to begin a ministry of visitation. But we need some kind of structure to begin a ministry of intentional congregational connection and care. We can't leave this to a few people or a committee. For every Christian, this is a duty.

Wesley had an advantage. As you may know, he had everyone organized in classes with leaders to keep watch over the class members. But you may not know that the small group system started out as a stewardship campaign! This is true. In 1741, the Methodist Society in Bristol had to pay off the debt on their meeting place called the New Room. So, one of Wesley's lay leaders, a Captain Foy, suggested that they divide the society into small classes of eleven or twelve and appoint a leader for each class who would visit each member of the class

once a week and collect a penny from them to help pay off the debt.

That's an idea our Finance Team hasn't explored yet. But it has possibilities. This is what happened in England: when the class leaders came to members' homes to collect pennies, they discovered some who didn't have enough food, so they fed them. They found couples in the midst of marital problems, so they counseled them. They found family members who were sick, so they nursed them. No matter how they found them, they prayed for them.

So, what started out as a stewardship campaign became a spiritual campaign and provided a structure for congregational care and spiritual growth that served the Methodist movement for 150 years. The class meetings began to fall away at the end of the nineteenth century, but it was still popular to do every-member canvasses when it came time to raise the budget. But it wasn't the same, probably because we trained

folks to raise money, not to raise Christians. We collected the pennies, but we didn't say the prayers, which means that we missed the opportunity to offer the presence of God.

I know that we can do better. We're going to offer prayers all the way through this stewardship campaign, and if anyone wants me to visit them to pray over their pledge, I'll be there! And after this stewardship campaign is over with this fall, one of my goals for the coming year is to start to rebuild that structure of care. We can't wait for those who are ailing to call for the elders of the church. We need to call on them. And I welcome your ideas about how to make that happen.

If we aren't about bringing the presence of God to other people, then we can turn out the lights and go home. If we are only asking for pennies and not offering our prayers, then our own light will go out before we even get home. Ruby Goodnight is going to be 97 this coming week. We're going to need at least 97 Ruby's to do the work that God is calling us to do, to

make the presence of God a little more tangible, a little more real. I can't think of a better birthday present that we could give her than to give the presence of God to someone else. So be it. Go to it.