

Sermon: October 4, 2020

Lord, make me an instrument....

Today I am taking a break from the lectionary and speaking to you as your health minister. We live in a time of great chaos and a time of serious pandemic. I want to take some time today to look at how we can practice our Christian faith daily even when we may be quarantined at home.

What do we know about Jesus himself? Well we know that Jesus was a teacher, a preacher and a healer. He gave life to the mind and the spirit through his teachings and his parables and he also gave life to the body in his ministry. His healings are well recorded in the New Testament. There are 22 healings of Jesus recorded in the gospels. The healing of the blind, the lame, the casting out of unclean spirits, the healing of lepers, and many others. All three of these: body, mind and spirit were important to him.

We, as Christians, come together at St. John's as a congregation to worship God, to love and support each other and to follow the words of Jesus in the world today. Congregations today offer us so much but do you realize how much they keep us healthier not only in spirit but also in mind and body? There is convincing evidence that those who belong to a religious congregation have less depression, less substance abuse, less suicide, lower blood pressure and more optimism. Being a member of a congregation and coming to church is good for your health.

So, I would like to talk about some specific things that we can do that will help us stay healthy in the months to come whatever they may bring. Now I believe you know pretty much about eating well (there is a huge amount of information available to us today). We all already know that exercise is important. Many of us have found that we can

take zoom classes or watch exercise videos at home to help us with that. And here I want to give a shout out to the Orwigsburg Lions for the walking trail behind the Blue Mountain elementary and middle schools. John and Wendi and I walk it every day at 6:30 and it has been a literal life saver. So, we all know that these things are important.

But there are other things that flow naturally out of our Christian faith that also give us health in ways that are related to who we are as Christians in the world.

We used to call these virtues. William Bennet reintroduced the word 'virtue' several years ago when he published his popular work, the Book of Virtues. It's not a word we use often today but let's look at few of the and how they affect us.

Let's start with the virtue of gratitude. Gratitude is the virtue of rejoicing in what we have. It is a feeling of joy that we have been blessed whatever is happening. It is the opposite of envy and discontent. And it is a powerful virtue. Many of our prayers begin with gratitude. Dear Lord, we thank you for all you have given us: this beautiful day, my friends, my family, my life.

Here are some lines from the Old Testament on gratitude:

Psalm 9:1 I will give thanks to you, Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.

Psalm 69:30 I will praise God's name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving.

Psalm 106:1 Praise the Lord. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.

In the New Testament we also hear of gratitude:

Ephesians 5:20 Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Colossians 3: 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

When we think about all God has done for us, our hearts overflow with gratitude.

And we become healthier. Besides making us happier, it is reported that gratitude is related to many physical health benefits: better sleep, less fatigue, less depression, more confidence in our ability to care for ourselves, and lower levels of systemic inflammation among other benefits.

What about the virtue of compassion? Compassion is defined as the emotional response when perceiving suffering in another and also involves an authentic desire to help alleviate that suffering.

Compassion appears as an attribute of God himself in the Old Testament:

Isaiah 49:10 Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

Psalms 51:1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.

Psalms 145: 8-9 The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.

We know Jesus as our compassionate savior. All his miracles were acts of compassion as recorded in the New Testament. Jesus always had compassion on those who followed him:

Matthew 14: 13-14 When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

Mark 6:34 When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So, he began teaching them many things.

By following Jesus as our model, we should practice the virtue of compassion. And Compassion improves your health by strengthening your immune system, normalizing your blood pressure, lowering your stress and depression, improving your physical recovery from illness, and even extending your life.

The last virtue I will speak about this morning is the virtue of peace. Peace can be the inner sense of peace that brings a sense of calmness and quiet. Peace can also be the absence of conflict in the outer world. We are told that Christ is the Prince of Peace in the famous line from Isaiah predicting his birth:

Isiah 9:6 To us a son is given. The authority to rule will rest on his shoulders. He will be named: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, *Prince of Peace*.

Jesus, himself, in the New Testament promises us peace if we follow him:

When Jesus was about to leave his disciples, he told them in **John 14:27** Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Paul echoes this promise of peace in **Philippians 4: 6-7** Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of

God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

A modern religious leader has told us that in order to have peace, we must be peace. Each of us needs to create peace within ourselves to bring peace to the world. These promises from Jesus assure us that we will find peace in our relationship with him, and this allows us to find peace in the shattered world.

And this peace will again make us physically healthier. Inner peace has a multitude of physiological and psychological benefits. Moreover, it also has benefits to those around us and the community at large. When we make peace a way of life, we are creating the world as a better place for all of us

The relationship between such virtues as gratitude, compassion and peace and our health is not accidental. What is good for our souls is also good for our bodies. What God is asking us to do in our own everyday lives makes our lives longer and happier. We can practice gratitude, compassion and peace no matter what our circumstances are. We are invited to do that by our scriptures and the teachings of our Savior.

Let us take time each day to truly be grateful for all that we have. Let us be compassionate to those less fortunate and finds ways to support them. Let us actively seek peace within ourselves so that we may honor the prince of peace through our lives.

We can use the prayer of St. Francis that we recited this morning daily to keep us centered each day.

Let us find that peace which surpasses all understanding through our love and respect for Jesus and all he has asked us to be in this world.

Amen.