

A HEALING COMMUNITY

→ When we use the word “healing” in a very general sense, I wonder what you think of? Perhaps you think of the amazing way in which the natural processes in our bodies bring about the healing of a cut or bruise? Maybe you think of the medication or treatment that brings about a cure in someone. Perhaps your mind goes to the healing of a broken relationship between two relatives or friends or maybe you think about something completely different. I don’t know what it conjures up in your mind but I’m assuming there may be quite a wide range of responses?

.....But, when we speak of the ministry of healing and wholeness within the life of the church, I suspect we might get less variation in the responses. Many of us would perhaps think of people being prayed for that they might be healed of an illness or having hands layed on them as they receive that prayer. Some of us perhaps feel that it’s something that some people in the church get involved in but it’s not for “me!” Others of us may be quite concerned about the whole concept because it raises all sorts of questions in our minds about why some people are healed and others aren’t!

.....And some of those questions and understandings of healing within the life of the church are partly why this morning we find ourselves at the beginning of a whole series of services in which we will explore what it means for us as a church to have a ministry of healing and wholeness. And through this shared journey I hope we will discover that is about so much more than simply praying with and for those who are ill.

→ As many of you will be aware, over recent weeks, members of the groups that meet within the life of the church and members of groups that use our premises have all been encouraged to answer a question about how they feel their particular group helps to enrich peoples lives and help them experience fullness of life. We’ve been thrilled at the number of you that responded and we have also received responses from people who meet in groups that use these premises. Those of you that were in church for a while before the worship began will have had chance to read some of those responses on the wonderful slides that were being shown as we gathered and we will be showing those again as we share in bread and wine later. And here on the tree at the front are leaves which reflect many of the words and phrases that commonly occurred in those responses.

.....Let me just share with you a few of the things said by people about the groups that they are part of here in this church family. I’m not going to tell you which groups they are talking about – you may be able to work that out for yourselves:

- It’s a friendly group of people providing a positive life-style and all round well-being
- It helps me with my work and my life outside of the church
- It’s a place to feel secure with my emotions, doubts and fears.
- It has an atmosphere of caring and friendship, community and fun. These are so often lacking in our lives as we get older so the group is life enhancing.
- This group has been better than the pills and therapy I was offered for my postnatal depression.

.....Those are just five of many, many responses that speak about the positive impact that the ministries and activities offered within the life of this church have on people. How wonderful! What a blessing! So, that means that many of you gathered here this morning are already actively involved in this church's ministry of healing and wholeness! Did you realise that? What you already do, helps to enhance people's lives in so many ways. It helps them to experience wholeness of body, mind and spirit. It helps them to experience fullness of life.

.....You see, when we speak of the ministry of healing and wholeness, it's not just some add on to our Sunday evening communion service where we pray for people with particular concerns; it's not just something for those who are particularly keen in their faith! No, the ministry of healing and wholeness is an integral part of what we are already doing! Just as our human bodies have inbuilt processes that bring about the healing of a cut or bruise, so the body of Christ should have the ministry of healing and wholeness as a natural part of who and what we are!

.....When you help to prepare the lunch at CAMEO or Friendly Food and provide hospitality, when you are on welcome duty on a Sunday morning and greet the new person or visitor, when you visit someone in their home to express our love and concern, when you offer your time to ensure that the Toddler Group or the Young Church can continue to nurture our young people, when you make tea after worship on a Sunday morning, when you lead the Home Group – you make a difference to people's lives and so you are part of the ministry of healing and wholeness that this church has. You are helping others to experience fullness of life and this ministry is an integral part of who and what we are as the body of Christ in this place.

.....So, what does it really look like for us as a body of people who follow Jesus to be a healing community which is the theme of our worship this morning and what on earth has this tree that is stood here at the front have to do with it all?

→ Well, let's return to this passage of scripture that we've heard this morning; a passage that uses the image, not of a tree, but of a vine; a plant that has many branches just like this tree, branches which are intertwined and which work together to make up the whole. This image of the vine that Jesus uses encourages all of us to think of ourselves as a branch which together with all the other branches makes up the whole. And within the life of the church we can think of all our groups and ministries as branches of the vine or the tree, working together to make up the network that is our ministry of healing and wholeness because everything we do in some way contributes to that ministry when it is borne out of our love for one another and our love for the world that God loves.

.....We're not meant to carry on in our little corner without ever thinking how what we do or don't do impacts upon other people or other groups or the community that we serve. In the verses that follow the passage that we have heard Jesus calls us to love one another just as he loves us and a healing community is one where love is expressed through the things that we are willing to do for and with one another.

→ Secondly, in this passage Jesus speaks about the need to remain in him. A healing community is a place where people stay connected to Christ through our worship, our prayer life, our reading of the Bible, our sharing with others as we study

and pray together. That's all really important because when a branch becomes disconnected from the trunk of the tree or from the stem of the vine for some reason, then it dries up and withers because it loses its source of nourishment and strength.

.....And the same is true of us. We may be doing very worthy things, but unless we stay connected to Christ and remember that all we do is because he loves us and we love him and because we want other people to experience that too, then suddenly what we do can start to feel like a chore. We can very easily become weary of the things that we're doing if we don't continue to see them as serving Christ and playing our part within this ministry of healing and wholeness. Losing our connection with Christ results in us giving up and thinking it's not worth it, because we lose our sense of purpose and we lose sight of our original motivation. In a healing community people stay connected to Christ.

→ And thirdly, in a healing community, the fullness of life that is experienced when people become part of the community can help them to come to faith in Christ for themselves. Isn't it wonderful to think that the meal you serve at CAMEO or the cup of tea you make for the Toddler Mums or the prayer you say with someone when you visit them or the chairs you move to make it possible for a group to meet can all help others to discover in their life what you have discovered in yours – that God's love is for all; that God's grace is for all; that God's forgiveness is for all; that God wants us all to experience fullness of life!

.....So, there's no doubt that many of us are already involved in this amazing ministry and I would want to affirm you in that this morning, but all of us can be involved and some of us can perhaps be involved in ways that are different from what we are currently experiencing. God may have something else or something more for you.

.....Over the coming weeks, we are going to continue to think much more about this whole area of healing and wholeness. We'll think about what it means for us to be restored in God's image and restored in our relationship with him. We'll tackle some of the more difficult questions about healing and if you do have questions that arise in you as these weeks progress, please do continue to place them in the box out in the narthex so that we can respond to them appropriately in due course.

.....The tree will be here right throughout this period as a reminder of the way in which we are called to put our roots down deep into Christ, how we are called to grow and bear fruit and how we are all connected to Christ and to one another. So please keep your eye on the tree, because each week you may see changes in it and we hope that might also be symbolic of the changes God will be working in our hearts and lives as we make this journey together.

.....So let's pray that the journey itself will be one of growth and discovery so that when we arrive at our harvest celebrations, some of us may already have fruit to harvest and many of us will be prepared to commit ourselves afresh to the part we sense God is calling us to play in the ministry of healing and wholeness that God continues to develop amongst us.