

Holy God, send Your Word, send Your Spirit, send Your love. Amen.

Last week I shared our new mission statement:

to connect people with the fiercely accepting love of Jesus.

Now we need to figure out, “What does that mean? How do we do that?”

Our readings today give us some pretty good guidance: We seek out people who need to be connected with the fiercely accepting love of Jesus.

That means we go to where people are hurting and in need of healing; to those who are seeking community and belonging.

Those are often people who are outcast, on the margins, “not good enough.”

In our New Testament those fell broadly into two categories:

people who were infirm, blind, lame, damaged, diseased;

and people who were not part of the Jewish community, or Gentiles.

So we see Jesus going to this place in the temple courts where the infirm hung out, by this pool whose waters were said to have healing properties.

I’m sure a lot of people went out of their way to avoid that place;

Jesus went right to it. That’s what he did. That’s what we are to do in his name.

Sometimes we can be surprised by who we find.

When I got to the church I served in Stamford, CT, it was small and struggling.

The merger of two small and struggling churches, the new church had already lost half its members. I proposed we rename it, really start fresh.

They had just smashed the two church names together, and it didn’t work.

Through a long process we arrived at a bold new name: Christ the Healer.

We began to pick up energy and increase outreach.

We started to have a presence among people who were homeless downtown.

We started to build relationships with people at a nearby nursing home.

We started to pick some of these people up for church, and after awhile our congregation included people who were poor, homeless, lame, in stages of dementia.

It was wonderful – but once I said at my clergy group,

“I wouldn’t mind if God sent us some people who weren’t so down and out...”

And one of my colleagues shot right back, “Well, Kate, you named it...”

Right. Name a church Christ the Healer, and who do you expect to attract?

That’s what happens as we open our hearts and our doors and get out

and offer the healing gifts of the Spirit to people in need.

Where are those places for us where people are in need of healing or seeking spiritual connection? They are all over our lives.

Some churches have a ministry called “Laundry Love,” where they invite people who are homeless to laundromats on slow days, and they bring the supplies and help do the loads of wash – and while laundry is being done, community is being formed. Pizza is being eaten, conversations happen – and if we were to do that, I’d have a prayer corner for anyone who wanted prayer.

That’s an example of going to where people need to be connected to the fiercely accepting love of Jesus.

You have people like that at your kitchen tables and in your social media feeds.

How might we foster those connections?

We find the pools. We follow the river.

Another group frequently marginalized in Jesus’ time were Gentiles.

Jewish identity was so frequently challenged, many learned to draw the lines really tightly, say, “You are in, and you are out.” And those “out” were Gentiles. So remember the story we heard last week, about the Holy Spirit telling the apostle Peter not to make distinctions like that anymore, and the Spirit coming in power upon a bunch of Gentiles while Peter preached... And the week before, we heard about how Jesus appeared to Saul while he was bent on arresting Christians and Saul became converted and baptized, and eventually became the apostle Paul whose primary mission was to Gentiles.

In this week’s story, we see Paul get a vision in a dream of a man from Macedonia saying, “Come and help us.”

He and his companions discern that this is a call from God, and they go.

And notice what they do – because this is a model for us as we move out in mission. They don’t stand around the city square calling, “Anyone want to hear about Jesus?” They think strategically about where they might find people open to hearing the Good News of freedom in Christ – and one place is where people go to pray. They looked for where there was a spiritual openness.

They know there were often places of prayer by the water, so they go to one.

They follow the river, and they find a group of women who were interested – and one of them, Lydia, a businesswoman, had a really open heart.

She was ready to believe, and then wanted to host them.

She became a founding member of the church in Philippi.

Remember Paul’s letter to the Philippians – that is to that church.

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They follow the river. Jesus said the Holy Spirit was like river of living water flowing out of our hearts as we believe. That river, friends, is already flowing. It is God's life, Christ's risen life, which comes to us through the Holy Spirit, and it flows through us to every place and person in need of healing and restoration. That river is already flowing from God's throne, a healing stream.

We need to step into that stream, to let it flow in and through us. Now, there can be obstacles to the free flow of that healing stream – resentment, fear of disappointment, inability to forgive or accept forgiveness, unhealed traumas buried deep, shame, conflicts with others, anger... As we surface these, we invite that stream to bear them away. That is healing.

Where do you desire to be healed? Maybe like the man in our gospel story, you've lived with a physical or emotional or life condition that blocks out joy, that keeps you from living your fullest, richest life. Maybe even for 38 years. And maybe, like that man, you have all kinds of reasons healing has not occurred. *"I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up..."* "I've always been like this." "I deserve to be like this."

"God has more important things to do than heal me." I've heard it all. And let me tell you with confidence: no one is more precious to God than you are. Nothing is more important to God than you being the fullest, most joyful and authentic you you can possibly be. God made you in love, for joy. God has gifted you and wants you to realize your purpose in life. God wants you whole. God wants us whole. God wants us in that healing stream. As we experience healing, we invite others into that stream with us.

Today we bring Apollo into that stream to be reborn, renewed, made whole. That's what happens for us at baptism – we are brought into the water with Jesus. Our merely natural selves die with him in that water, and our new, eternal selves are raised with him. Our spiritual work is to become more and more familiar with that living water flowing through us, and seeking to invite others into that stream. Then we become those pools in which others can find healing. We become rivers with places of prayer along our banks, places where the spiritually thirsty can connect with the fiercely accepting love of Jesus. I can't think of a higher calling for each one of us. I can't think of a higher calling for Christ Church. Jesus will meet us in that stream. Amen.

John 5:1-9

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.

Acts 16:9-16

During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.