

Faith Mennonite Church
December 10, 2015
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Trusting God's Healing
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7

In the Zephaniah passage, it says God will gather those who are outcast and lame and , “Change their shame into praise.” God will change our shame into praise.

I don't know about you, but that is the healing I need. I found out this fall that I have an aggressive kind of brain cancer. In healing with that, I think the medicine I most need is God turning my shame into praise. The places in us and in our communities where we think we are too broken to receive God's redeeming love, places where we don't think we deserve God's grace. Do we trust that God can really heal cancer? Heal racism? Heal those other places of deep shame and fear?

In October, I had a gathering to support my healing that was held here in this sanctuary. Some of you were there. My two nephews, who are both teenagers, stood over there and sang “Since Love is Lord of Heaven and Earth, how can I keep from singing.” Since love is Lord of Heaven and Earth, how can I keep from singing? As they sang, I cried because of how much I love them, and for how much love I felt coming towards me. I cried with the fragility of knowing I might not be alive to see my nephews and others I love for nearly as I thought I would. Since that day, that line has been echoing within me and working on me, since love is lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing. It feels like my nephews are inside my heart signing it to me, and like the wider Body of Christ, including all of you, are surrounding me, lifting me up with your song. If I pay attention, I can hear that song, and I know that love has been the most powerful and enduring force in my life, but I often forget this, and don't live in the power of it.

I'm not a member of Faith Mennonite. I imagine I am one of hundreds of people on the edges of the congregation, touched by your community without being a formal part of the congregation.

For the past two months I've been imaging all of you as a giant, expanding, magic slime—a good kind of slime—one that spreads God's love, that expands to fill this space, then goes out the windows and doors, oozing through the neighborhood to my house a few blocks away, and in all directions. I love how you are a permeable community, reaching out and touching so many beyond your walls.

The slime looks like many things to me:

It looks like the hospitality I felt when I had that gathering to support my healing in your sanctuary. I felt held by you.

It looks like the prayers I felt for me as you had your fall retreat.

It looks like Joetta's rice pudding and hospital visits.

It looks like Tyler's help setting things up for the event to support me.

It looks like Rudy Okerlund's wisdom that soaks into me over time.

It looks like generosity from several of you contributing to my health expenses or bringing my family meals.

All these things, and many more, remind me of the ways love is Lord of Heaven and Earth, and your actions allow me to trust that power more

Since my diagnosis, I've come to know the reality of the Body of Christ in ways I hadn't before, to see our web of relationships, woven together in God's love. Churches, like Faith, can serve that body, and you do so beautifully.

A week and a half ago, I came over to the church office to pray with Joetta, as I did when I was a part-time staff person here several years ago. In that prayer time, I felt the powerful ways this congregation serves the wider body of Christ. I also saw God burning away all that separates me and us from the ways love is Lord of Heaven and

Earth. I saw dead wood in me being burned away, so that I might live more fully in God's love. I saw the ways radiation and chemo were a part of that burning, but that God was also throwing additional layers of my shame and fear into that fire. God was also burning in this congregation, cleansing all that separates us from God's love, asking us, are we ready to let go of the habits and attachments that separates us from that love? God wants to burn away shame in us, in Faith Mennonite, and turn it into praise.

God said he will turn our shame into praise. One thing I have felt shame about lately is when I get stuck in fear and dread, stuck in thinking about survival rates and treatment side effects. One unexpected side effect was that I was in the hospital for a week, to drain spinal fluid out my back, to help the incision on my head heal.

At 2 a.m. one of those nights, alone in my hospital room on my back, I felt especially stuck in fear and dread about all the other bad things that could happen to me. I felt ashamed of being stuck there. In that place, in a combination of dream, imagination, and prayer, it felt like Martin Luther King, Jr. came into my hospital room, and knelt next to me. He called me son, and delivered for me, the end of the speech he gave the night before he died. He knew that he could die soon, and I think he felt shame that he had not accomplished all his goals. In the speech, he said

“We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life; longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*”

Dr. King breathed a peace and strength into me in my hospital bed, so that I knew that even if I don’t personally get to the places I hope my family gets to, the places I hope our community gets to, I felt the peace of knowing that we as a people will get to the promised land. Even if I don’t get to see my grandchildren, or see Minnesota eliminate racial disparities, and see societies reverse global warming, from that mountaintop with MLK, I felt the glory of the Lord coming and I knew throughout my bones that there was nothing to be afraid of. God will turn our shame into praise, for my family, for our community, for our planet.

I thank you for the ways you have helped turned my shame into praise, and for the ways you have helped me see and trust that love is Lord of Heaven and Earth.