

*A sermon given on Sunday, October 18, 2009,
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

St. Luke: Physician and Evangelist

“I’ve come up with the solution to the church’s budget shortfall,” a woman named Suki told me twenty years ago. “Great,” I said, “What’s the solution?” “Well,” she replied, “I see that we carry health insurance for you. We can cut it out and save a lot.” Supposing that perhaps I should be flattered that she thought I was such a physically perfect specimen that I didn’t need insurance, I murmured something about the prudence of being prepared for the unexpected. Then came her real point. “But you’re a priest!” she cried. “If you have enough faith, you shouldn’t need health insurance!” Suki’s earnest assumption was that a person of faith has no need of medical science.

In that, she mirrored the parallel assumption held a generation ago by some in the medical field. Hospital chaplaincies, long a fixture in American medical institutions, became more and more hard to find from the 1960’s to the 1980’s. Among certain medical scientists and hospital executives, chaplains were a dispensable sop to the irrelevant emotional needs of their patients. If Suki believed that a person of faith had no need of medical science, her counterparts at the hospital were equally sure that a person of modern scientific sensibility had no need of faith.

Happily, that false dichotomy has largely waned in more recent years. The interrelatedness of physical and spiritual health has been recognized more and more by those in each realm. Chaplaincies have been re-established in many hospitals, while in some churches, parish nursing programs have sprung up. But if we think this physical and spiritual interrelatedness is a new insight, of course we are wrong. Here to remind us that health and healing have been understood holistically since Christianity’s very inception is the saint whose feast day we celebrate today, St. Luke – known in the church with two monikers: St. Luke the Evangelist, and St. Luke the Beloved Physician.

Luke was a close friend of our patron, the Apostle Paul, and traveled with Paul on some of his mission journeys. Paul mentions Luke three times in his letters. It is Paul who dubs Luke “the beloved physician,” and in one of Paul’s letters from prison, he says that Luke is his only remaining companion. By tradition it is this same physician, Luke, who went on to become the evangelist, Luke – author of Luke’s Gospel, and of the Book of Acts, describing Paul’s mission and the early years of the fledgling Christian community.

Luke’s is a gospel in which the Christian proclamation and Christian faith is a matter not of religious inheritance, nor of theological niceties. It is a gospel of hands-on compassion. A gospel of forgiveness, acceptance, and care. A gospel of love. Of the four gospels, only Luke records the Song of Mary, in which she sings that “the hungry will be filled with good things.” Only Luke relates the parable of the Prodigal Son, in which the wayward and lost is received home and loved unconditionally. Only Luke relates the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which ethnic lines are crossed in the name of compassion and healing. Citing these features of Luke’s gospel – compassion, care, and healing – Frederick Buechner says, “These characteristics may not prove that [the evangelist] Luke was a doctor, like the Luke in Paul’s letter, but if he wasn’t, it was a serious loss to the medical profession.” [*Peculiar Treasures*, p. 95]

So with our liturgy today we commemorate St. Luke, Physician and Evangelist. In so doing, we affirm that physical and spiritual health are interrelated. And we declare that the practice of medical arts is itself a sign of the gospel. It is so because it is an expression of compassion. It is so, also, because medical wellness points in a partial way towards the fuller, ultimate wholeness which is God’s desire for us. Thus it is that the church’s calendar includes not only St. Luke, but others whose contribution to

God's Kingdom on Earth was in the realm of medical care. Think of Florence Nightingale, 19th century nurse, whose feast day is August 12. Think of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, 13th century noblewoman who founded hospitals for the poor, remembered on November 19.

I am taken by this description of healing and wholeness from a theological journal called

Insights:

Wholeness involves relating the broken and tragic events in life to a larger picture such that the whole – the beautiful and the ugly – holds together without the latter dominating. Health is not some ideal state of affairs, but a way of being, and healing is any movement toward the abundant life set before us in Jesus Christ. ... In seeking healing many people have in mind a restoration to a previously known health, but God's life-giving ways lead to a not-yet-given wholeness. ... [H]ealing does not restore control of our lives to us so much as it restores the possibility of participating more fully in [God's] mysterious way of being. ... God's way of healing is both temporary and eternal. Biological healing is an example of the temporal, and the existential dimension points to the ways in which temporal existence catches glimpses of the eternal and of the transition from earthly life through death into transcendent wholeness. ... Since God desires and promises human wholeness, healing processes and events are concrete signs of the Kingdom of God, come near. ¹

As a physician, Luke promoted biological healing. As an evangelist, Luke promoted abundant life in Christ. As one engaged in both endeavors, Luke surely knew that they were bound together. And what bound them together was that which is at the heart of Luke's gospel: compassion and love.

The healing professions which we honor today, the healing prayers which we offer today (as on third Sundays every month) – these are manifestations of God's compassion and love which heal us in ways sometimes visible and sometimes not. And, of course, you and I are called to manifest that love, regardless of our earthly vocation.

A couple of weeks ago our college son included this news in a note home: "*I have a pet fish now. There was a guy at the campus center last week selling them, and I decided that I wouldn't mind having something to take care of.*" The heart of the parent is somehow deeply touched by the notion that one's child has grown up with the desire to have something for which to care. So what has it been named, this object of my child's ministrations? The note continues: "*I named him Luke as a tribute to the late great Paul Newman (he's the same color as Newman's eyes, and I thought Cool Hand Luke was the most appropriate character reference, considering the possibilities of a fish bowl-prison metaphor).*"

Well, okay. My son the film buff can think his fish is named Luke in honor of his fellow Shaker High graduate, Paul Newman. But as for me, I think this blue fish is named Luke because in his own fishy little way, he's a sign of the impetus towards compassion. Luke the Beloved Physician. Luke the Compassionate Evangelist. Luke the Little Blue Fish.

We give thanks today for St. Luke: for his two-volume gospel, bearing witness to the healing power of Christ and of Christ's church. We give thanks for Luke's vocation as physician, bearing witness to the dialectic blessing of faith and the medical arts. And we give thanks for those who practice those arts in our day and in our midst, asking God to bless them with the Holy Spirit as they extend the healing power of God's love.

¹ Ralph Underwood, "God's Life-Giving Ways," in *Insights: the Journal of Austin Seminary*, v. 114, no. 2 (1999), pp. 5-8, *passim*.