The year was 1903. The charismatic, well-respected speaker at the banquet honoring a world-renowned physician was the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, George W. Truett. In an inspired moment, Truett addressed those gathered: *Is it not now the time to begin the erection of a great humanitarian hospital, one to which men of all creeds or those of none may come with equal confidence?*

What would later become Baylor Hospital started out with a vision from a Baptist pastor who saw that residents of the burgeoning city of Dallas had poor access to good healthcare, especially the poor themselves. Truett also would make no distinction among people who needed healthcare based upon their religious convictions or the lack of them.

Why did Dr. Truett see tending to the sick and dying as something the church ought to concern itself with? Or why for that matter did those Christian leaders who started Methodist or Presbyterian or St. Paul’s hospitals, notwithstanding what they are called today? We need look no further than to our Gospel text today from Mark, chapter 1.

Jesus has just left the synagogue in Capernaum where he cast out an unclean spirit from a demon-possessed man. He didn’t reward the disturbed man with a seat on a key synagogue committee. He didn’t sit him down for talk therapy. The unclean spirit fed on fear and was so deeply rooted in the man that Jesus had to give him a deep cleaning.

Jesus then goes next door to Simon Peter’s house. If you go to Capernaum today, you can see the ruins of the synagogue and the house. A church is built atop the house with a glass-bottom floor allowing you to see where this episode took place. By this episode, I mean Jesus’ healing of Peter’s mother-in-law and then the steady stream of people who came knocking at the door who were either sick or demon possessed. Jesus healed them all, deeply.

Healing, along with teaching,
was integral to Jesus’ ministry. And the implication is clear that if it was integral to Jesus’ ministry, it should be integral to the church’s ministry, too.

But what should the church’s healing ministry entail? If we follow the pattern of this story of Jesus’ healing ministry, we will get some clues.

When Jesus enters the house of Simon Peter, he learns that Peter’s mother-in-law is sick. Someone tells him about her at once. In other words, they didn’t think it noble to keep her fever a secret. The community cared enough to communicate about her illness. They took it to Jesus, just as we still can. What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry, everything to God in prayer.

Jesus goes to her at once, takes her by the hand and raises her up. Her fever lifts as he lifts her up.

Keep in mind, modern medicine has yet to be invented and we don’t have a diagnosis here other than a fever. What we have is Jesus caring about her being sick and doing something about it. He doesn’t always touch people to heal them, so touch itself is not a technique per se. It’s more that he is personally present to her. It matters to him that this woman is suffering physically.

I can’t begin to describe to you how much of our church’s pastoral ministry involves caring for the sick in one way or another. I spent most of the day that I was writing this sermon being interrupted by calls, texts and emails from or about people who are suffering from COVID or other afflictions. When people get sick, they not only go to a doctor or hospital for help, their church rallies to them in prayer and cares for them and their loved ones. We keep a daily CareNotes list of those who need us to lift them up in prayer. We move toward the sick. We don’t leave them to suffer in solitude.

Which leads to the second thing: the church has a healing ministry that goes beyond curing. When someone takes ill, they need medical help to address the disease. That’s good and right. But there’s always more going on when someone is sick than just the symptoms of the disease. The illness needs to be healed, too. And illness includes the feeling of being cut off, isolated, sometimes
quarantined, don’t you know?!

We do that by connecting with words and deeds, promises of prayer, notes of sympathy, calls of encouragement, casseroles on the front porch. There’s something about the spiritual connection of the faith community that takes healing deeper than the curing of the disease.

I told you about the church’s commitment to healthcare by the building of hospitals, but the church also spawned chaplaincy programs to address the larger issues of healing the person not just curing the patient. While we have valiant medical personnel, who have been working for nearly a year at levels of exhaustion unknown before COVID, there are also trained clinical pastoral caregivers who visit these patients and their families courageously and compassionately. This is a holistic approach to healing that the church is involved in. Doctors and nurses address what is acute to the body of the patient. They often go beyond that themselves, but the special purview of pastoral caregivers and counselors is addressing the effects of the illness on the person. They don’t just ask how a patient feels; they ask how the person feels about how they feel. They inquire about their faith, their prayers, their relationships. They talk to the families, too, because when one person is sick, the whole family experiences the illness.

In our church, as in some others, we have Stephen Ministers who walk beside people who are going through difficult times in their lives. We host the Grief and Loss Center of North Texas, led by Laurie Taylor, to aid the emotional and spiritual healing of those who have experienced the trauma of death or divorce or some other deep grief.

Watch what happens when Jesus lifts up Peter’s unnamed mother-in-law. She immediately begins to serve them. If she were my wife’s mother-in-law, I can promise you that would include a meal.

Now, you might see that and say that upon being healed she returns to her subservient role as a woman who waits on the men in a patriarchal culture. But there’s something more to this: she was able to resume serving as a sign that healing is more than curing. Healing puts her back into the web of life.
Consider our COVID life right now. When someone is struck with the virus and is hospitalized for weeks, she loses her opportunity to work and take care of her family. Plus, the caregiving family members have their lives and work disrupted, as do those at their places of work that are sometimes even shut down because of it. The ripple effect is enormous.

Sickness is systemic. We know this throughout the nation as businesses have been shuttered entirely or deeply impacted. Careers have been put on hold. Dreams, too. We are working hard not only to address the coronavirus but also to keep life afloat for people. We are seeing how a disease that afflicts an individual is an illness that afflicts society.

This is why access to preventive healthcare is so critical, along with good health education. The church’s healing ministry shouldn’t just attend to what happens after a person gets sick; we need to advocate for health education, access to healthy foods and health insurance for everyone, too. When we politicize everything, everything becomes about power instead of love. The love of power hurts; the power of love heals.

We’ve seen this in the rollout of the vaccine that has been a disappointing from the beginning. Not enough vaccines immediately available. The distribution fraught with supply chain issues. As always, the rich have fared better than the poor, whites better than people of color, and the healthy better than those beset by preexisting conditions. It’s been one thing after another. This isn’t about assigning blame so much as seeing the big picture.

Some things never change, it seems. We just had a remarkable presentation at Wilshire this week of Anthony Clarvoe’s play, The Living. It was written in 1991 about the bubonic plague in London in 1665. You would think it was written in 2021. All the same issues are present. The politics of privilege, the suspicions of people in power, the denial of the disease, the disparity between essential workers and the nobility, the violence spawned by fear, the outbreak of lying. At one point in the play, a minister reports to the mayor that despite warnings the churches continue to meet to worship. Overhearing this, a
nobleman responds:  
*Commendable, really. Stupid, but commendable.* They wonder if there’s any way to keep the people from church. Make the sermons more boring, one suggests. Impossible says another.

Well, we’re doing our best around here at Wilshire, as are most other churches, protecting the health of the community by keeping our distance from one another without resorting to more boring sermons. We want to promote deep healing—holistic wellness that touches on physical, social, emotional and spiritual vitality altogether.

The end of the play holds out hope. Two survivors hold out their hands and touch. The human connection is made. It’s uplifting. Just like Jesus reaching out his hand to Peter’s mother-in-law and lifting her up.

We are praying in these days that our no-touch healing ministry will help lift the fever of COVID and some of our social illnesses, too. Then finally, we will all be able to clasp hands and return to the land of the living. Amen.