

Nursing school is quite the thing. From bedpans, to injections, to wound care, to calculating dose per pound, to nearly passing out in the operating room, nursing school wades through human frailty, one fragility at a time. Underlying the instruction about caring for the body, is a constant reminder that people are more than their current diagnosis and more than bodies to be treated. People are social, emotional, spiritual beings too.

None of this is surprising news. We could easily add to that short list about what makes people, people. What is surprising is how often we forget that this is true. We forget our own complexity and we definitely forget other people's many layers. Thankfully, nurses are trained to assess the whole person, chart their assessments accordingly, make a plan, and take action.

Jesus would have made a great nurse. Last week, at the beginning of John's sixth chapter, a very practical Jesus responded to the crowd and the disciples' growling stomachs with bread and fish and leftovers to spare. Their physical hunger was the pressing need of the moment. Jesus assessed their need, made a plan, acted on the plan, and continued his assessment as they continued to follow him thinking they could make him their king.<sup>1</sup>

He was quick to clear up their misunderstanding although their confusion about Jesus mirrors our own. We constantly try to define Jesus as one thing – teacher, prophet, priest, or king – and misunderstand the magnitude of all that Jesus came to be as the Son of God. Desmond Tutu, former archbishop of South Africa, makes this point when he's asked about whether he preaches a Social Gospel, the question suggesting that Jesus came to only feed people and liberate people so we should focus only on that too. Bishop Tutu said:

I don't preach a social gospel; I preach the Gospel, period. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is concerned for the whole person. When people were hungry, Jesus didn't say, "Now is that political or social?" He said, "I feed you." Because the good news to a hungry person is bread.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John 6:14-15

<sup>2</sup> Former Archbishop Desmond Tutu. <https://www.biographyonline.net/spiritual/quotes/desmond-tutu-quotes.html>

Perhaps Desmond Tutu would also have made a good nurse as he celebrates Jesus' concern for the whole person. Or perhaps he's just agreeing that Jesus would have made a good nurse. Regardless, Jesus actually fed people. And, to his point in the Bible reading today, Jesus came to do more than actually feed people.

As humans, we are more than our need for food and safety but it's easy to forget when our food or safety are threatened. The Israelites are prime examples of such forgetfulness in the reading from Exodus. Under Moses' leadership, they had been freed from slavery in Egypt and were wandering in the wilderness – tired, hungry, and exposed to the elements. They were aimless examples of the human condition. A human condition which can be summed up in this story as having short memories and being afraid.<sup>3</sup>

It's odd that this story was written down. It was quite unique in ancient times to record a story that failed to assess the heroes as consistently strong, virtuous, and victorious.<sup>4</sup> In their remembrance of this humbling story, our Jewish cousins in the faith remember the presence and provision of God alongside their own ancestors' fragile faith caused by fear and hunger.

The crowd following Jesus remembered Moses, and the manna to munch on, to frame the miracle that fed the 5,000 and to ask for more. Jesus reminded them that both the manna and the miracle were signs that point to God. He named himself the Bread of Life while naming spiritual hunger and thirst. We know that Jesus cared for hungry people by feeding them and asks us to do the same. In fact, Jesus taught that when we feed hungry people, we're feeding Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> Rolf Jacobsen, Professor of Old Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. Conversation about Exodus 16 on Sermon Brainwave for August 1, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

We also know that the church, by definition, is the body of Christ, through which Jesus gives himself to us as the Bread of Life and we pray to become what we receive in Holy Communion. We gather in worship to tell these stories of our ancestors by faith that both comfort and challenge us by their humbling similarities to us. We witness through our confession of sin that our failure to trust God and love each other has consequences for ourselves and other people.

And we're reminded that God's unconditional forgiveness isn't simply a reason to keep on sinning and being jerks – or worse. God's unconditional forgiveness humbles us to the reality of our human condition and promises not to leave us there. Through forgiveness, and through surrender to the one who shows us mercy, we are promised that our past sins do not define our future and do not define the world's future. Something else, dare I call it transformation, becomes possible – transformation of ourselves and our world as we cling less tightly to our self-absorption and more tightly to God.

Spiritual assessment takes stock of our denial, despair, fear, and suffering, as well as our hope, faith, trust, and love. A humble and honest assessment takes stock of our human condition and our reaction to it. The reading from Ephesians is just such an invitation to each of us as individuals to assess our spiritual lives. But the letter to the Ephesians is more than that too. It's a letter to the faithful church. The first verse of the first chapter says, "To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus." By extension as the body of Christ here and now, we can imagine it as written, "To the saints who are in Augustana, and are faithful in Christ Jesus." Is that as shocking to hear as it felt to write?

Regardless, this letter is also written to us today. A call to the church “to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”<sup>5</sup>

Sunday worship and Faith Formation, ministry meetings and funerals, baptisms and Bible Studies, are all opportunities for us to practice this calling, to assess how we’re doing spiritually, and to be called to the one hope of our calling, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”<sup>6</sup>

Many of us have been on the planet long enough to know that there is no arrival to any kind of holy perfection. That, in and of itself, is a gift and a big relief. But Christ does infuse our being human with divine being – in baptism, in gathering in his name, and in holy communion as the Bread of Life.

We rely on his gift of himself for spiritual transformation from despair to hope, from denial to truth, from self-absorption to trust, and from hatred to love.

And we rely on Jesus’ gift of himself to use our many gifts for the good of the whole and “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

In our life of ministry as the church, we are called to speak the truth in love as we grow into Christ, who joins us together to promote our growth in love.<sup>8</sup>

And that is good news indeed, for us and for the world. Thanks be to God. And amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 4:1-3

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 4:5

<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 4:12

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians:15-16