

Columbia Theological Seminary Commencement Sermon

Do You Want to Be Healed?

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Scripture Text: John 5:1-9

More than 32 million Americans have contracted Covid-19 and more than 570,000 have died of the disease, do you want to be healed?

George Floyd, Brionna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbury, Daniel Prude, Daunte Wright. Do Black Lives Matter? Do you want to be healed?

Last year was the warmest year on record. In several cities in Asia and the Middle East, the temperature reached 130 degree in the summer. Climate change will wreak havoc on the planet. Do you want to be healed?

US billionaires have gotten \$1.2 trillion richer during the pandemic. But almost 10 million people in the US are unemployed. The gap between the rich and the poor has widened enormously. Do you want to be healed?

Closer to home, eight people were shot dead in the Atlanta area last March, and among them six Asian women. When will gun violence end? Do you want to be healed?

The Gospel talks about Jesus healing a man who was ill for thirty-eight years. Healing was a very important part of Jesus' ministry. He healed the blind, deaf, lame, sick, injured, and infirmed, and cast out evil spirits from people. Most of those he healed were Jewish people under that heavy yoke of the Roman Empire. They suffered from both physical ailments and psychosomatic illnesses. Jesus' healing and performing of miracles showed his power as the Son of God and served as signs of the coming of God's Kingdom.

Healing individuals and communities will be a significant part of the future ministry and leadership of this year's graduates. In every generation, God has chosen faithful servants and leaders to respond to God's call. This year, you are the chosen ones of 2021. Many of you have spent half of your theological education during the coronavirus pandemic. When classes suddenly shifted online, you had to juggle between virtual classes and childcare or other family responsibilities. When we could not meet in person for worship, you had to adapt to the new situations in your fieldwork sites, perhaps quickly learning to become tech assistants putting together virtual services and church gatherings. Though you had to adjust to the new normal and might feel exhausted, you reached out to support one another and provided care to those who have become ill or perhaps died because of COVID. You are a very special class, who have shown remarkable resilience, perseverance, and devotion to God's calling.

The Gospel story has a lot to teach us today as we face the pandemic, the national reckoning of racial injustice, climate change, gun violence, and growing economic inequity. In the story, Jesus asks the man lying by the pool by the Sheep Gate, "Do you want to be healed?" That man complains that before he can go into the waters, others have stepped in before him. The people at the time believed that an angel of the Lord would come down at certain seasons and stirred up the water. Whoever stepped in first after the water was stirred would be healed of his or her malady.

There are a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, and paralyzed people lying in the porticoes around the pool. These people may not have the means to see a doctor. They may have no other ways to get healed. In our own time, the coronavirus shines a spotlight on racial and economic inequities in our society. Racism, inequality, and the coronavirus combined to cause an alarming number of Covid-19 cases and deaths among African American and Latinx populations. There is

also a global health inequity that impedes our work to fight the virus. When the coronavirus became a pandemic, countries fought to get masks, protective equipment, test kits, and medical amenities. As soon as the vaccines entered clinical trials, wealthier countries began hoarding doses to protect their residents. As a result, the richest countries accounted for 16 percent of the world's population but held 53 percent of all purchased vaccines. As of mid-April, more than 81 percent of the vaccines has been given in high- and upper-middle-income countries. Low-income countries have received only 0.3 percent. It is gut-wrenching to see COVID patients dying while waiting in line to get medical help in India and other low-income countries. The photos of the bodies of Covid victims, lying burning in funeral pyres in India or mass burial sites in Brazil amid an explosion of new infections and deaths are chilling.

In the Gospel story, the man was sick for a long time—thirty-eight years. He has waited and waited, but no one comes to his rescue and put him in the pool when the water is stirred. When he is making his way to the pool, someone else steps in ahead of him. Human selfishness runs deep especially when we are in need, then and now. The man possibly does not have much hope to get healed, after all these years. But Jesus has compassion for him and asks him to rise and take up his mat and walk. Jesus heals him even though that day is a Sabbath.

Today, Jesus is asking us, “Do you want to be healed?” This is more than our individual illness because the whole society is so sick. White nationalism, misogyny, and systemic racism have ravaged our society and divided our communities. Since March 2020, more than 3,800 incidents of anti-Asian hatred have been reported. Nowadays, when I take a walk in my neighborhood, I have to be vigilant if there is someone walking behind me. Many of us who experience racism and microaggressions on a daily basis have longed for healing for a very long time.

Proud graduates of 2021, you have your work cut out for you. As the man in the Gospel story has been waiting for helpers and allies to help in his healing process, today many people wish for faith leaders and ministers to lead our sick social body into wholeness. Not by accident, but by divine providence, you have spent these years in the halls of Columbia, learning about biblical exegesis, theology and ethics, Christian history, practical theology, and ministerial skills. The education you have received has prepared you to lead in churches, in the non-profit sector, government, and corporations amidst world-changing events.

So, we send forth this year's graduates to be healers, justice-seekers, and faithful servants to usher in God's Kingdom. This ritual is called commencement because your education has not finished. You are going to be continually formed by the people who will open their houses for you and invite you into their midst. As a leader, you will be formed and shaped by the people whom you have been called to serve.

You have to be faithful to the Gospel and always be open to the promptings of the Spirit. In *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Bruggeman, who taught at Columbia Theological Seminary for many years, writes, "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us." Therefore, hold on to your visions but remember that unless your dreams are shared by those whom you serve, you cannot change the world alone. Be sure to replenish your energy, or *qi*, and take care of your physical, psychic, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

When you are tired and the temptation to give up sinks into your soul, remember the time when God first called you to study at Columbia Theological Seminary. Wherever you go and however hard the journey is going to be, know that you are never alone for you will always be a

part of the Columbia community. We give thanks to God for who you are, and we thank your families and all those who have supported you in your theological journey. May God's rich blessings be upon you now and forever. Amen.