

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56.

Pastor Val invited us to get out of our comfort zones during her sabbatical. I'm completely out of my comfort zone up here.

The text for today from both Jeremiah and Mark is about healing and being healed, about compassion for those in need and taking time for self-care.

I want to tell you my story of healing and being healed, which is my story of God acting in my life. It's also my story of how and why I'm a family doctor.

I was raised atheist. My parents had many fine qualities, but no awareness of God. They cared about education and science. They were uncomfortable with messy human feelings. It never crossed my mind in childhood to want to be a doctor. I wanted to study math, keeping a healthy distance from messy human feelings.

In college I did study math, and I sang in the glee club. Another singer had a small choir at a small church. He asked a few of us to come, to strengthen his choir. I like to help, and a friend was going, so I went too. This was my first experience of church, and I didn't have to be anything I wasn't. I spent a couple of years in that church, marinating in liturgy and sacred music. When it was time to move on, I didn't want to give up the church-going habit. I don't know the denomination of that church, but it was full of kindness. They respected education and science as compatible with faith. They accepted me without reservation.

After math I studied computer science, and worked as a software engineer for 25 years. I was good at it. I gained seniority and respect, recognition and experience, but I eventually noticed that I wasn't happy. I couldn't figure out why I wasn't happy at work. I had good, challenging software projects, building software systems that did things that hadn't been done before, working for defense contractors. I had everything I had wanted in a career, but it wasn't working out as I'd expected.

After work every day I had to tell myself that I wasn't making war machines, just parts that could be used for any purpose. That was true, except that the parts I was making could only be used on a Navy jet fighter.

Once in a while I talked to others at work, but mostly we sent emails, because there was a record and the communication was more precise. Every six months or so I would finish something and feel some accomplishment. Several times my project was cancelled by an act of Congress, so everything I'd done for a year or two was thrown out. Most days I couldn't point to any progress or achievement at the end of the day.

I wondered what difference my work was making in the world. I tried to think of reasons to go to work at all. I worried about people whose basic needs for food, shelter and sanitation weren't met. I wished I could find a way to use my aptitude for math and

science to help people, a little more than smiling at the grocery checker and donating to my church's mission projects.

In the Mark passage, crowds of people went to Jesus and asked for healing. Perhaps there were some people who held back, who weren't ready to be healed or weren't aware that they needed healing.

I didn't realize that my soul was sick, that I had outgrown my software career and needed to listen to God's prompting. I wasn't listening to the hints God was giving me, so the hints grew more explicit.

Is there some part of your life that needs a course correction? Where you have been holding back, not willing to accept the healing that God offers?

In my case, God's voice was practically shouting: the word Medicine started to appear over the traffic on my daily commute. It was annoying, because I already had a career, with many years invested. A career change would be irresponsible because I had children and a mortgage. Medicine sounded like fun, but -- here is my biggest argument -- I would be unable to donate to the church. Surely God wouldn't ask me to stop donating to the church!

It took me five years to stop arguing. I didn't fully understand that God was behind the persistent wish to go back to school. Career change seemed like a preposterous, irresponsible, even selfish, idea.

Years later, at the beginning of Med school, I talked with a patient who wanted to change his life. He wanted to get off drugs and go to school to be an accountant. But, he said it was too late to go back to school, because he was already 26. I was able to say, look at my grey hair -- I went back to school at 48!

In software we never made a decision without gathering all the facts, but in medicine we have to go with the most likely diagnosis to avoid a delay in treatment. In software we could follow the progress of our project and find out what happened in the end. That 26-year old man? I don't know what happened in his story, but I know God was at work in his life.

In the last year or two I worked in software, I started playing solitaire on the computer at work. I had deadlines to meet, but I was discouraged and frustrated and couldn't concentrate. I knew I needed to get out of my situation, but I couldn't figure out how -- and I was so tired and dispirited that I wasn't in any shape to interview for any new line of work.

The word Medicine still showed above the traffic on my morning commute, so I went to the university book store and bought the textbook used for the Med school biochemistry class. I read the first three chapters that weekend and did all the problems at the end of each chapter. Suddenly I was full of energy, but I still had my practical, logical reasons I

couldn't leave the career that was making me feel dead. Still, I felt better when I was studying biochemistry or reading about diseases and cures, so I kept doing that.

In the end, I started Med school in August of 2001, just after my youngest child finished high school. He had to learn to fly on his own pretty quickly, because the nest was already gone.

The cure for my soul-sickness was to cooperate with God 's plan instead of resisting. Med school was hard and scary: never enough time and too much to learn too fast, and what if I fail the next test? My classmates spoke of buying more underwear because they didn't have time to do laundry.

It was hard but it was also fascinating, and it gave me energy.

I found a church that suited me well, and went on a women's retreat before I actually knew anyone. I met a retired nurse named Pat who had buried her husband a few months before. Her husband had been a doctor, but I didn't know that yet. She started sobbing when I explained about going to med school so I could take care of the outcasts and marginalized people Jesus loved.

We had anatomy class in the first year of med school. You can always tell a first year med student because they smell of formaldehyde. Each group of four students shared one cadaver. Dissection of our cadavers took all year. My group had a male cadaver. We learned when we opened his lungs that he had been a smoker. We named him Tom, and the lessons he taught us were priceless.

On Tuesday nights I went to the book group at church. Pat was always there, always interested in my studies, often asking about anatomy class. At the end of the year she revealed that one of the cadavers was her husband, who had been a smoker. She had been wondering all year if the body I dissected was her husband's. It wasn't.

My plan was to work in an emergency department because anybody can get care there, and because I can bring calm to crisis situations. I watched an Emergency doc tell the parents that their child had died, and I thought I could do a better job even before I was trained.

There are lots of doctors for people with jobs and good insurance and good social skills, and I didn't feel any desire to be one of them. If the call to serve through medicine was to make any sense , I had to be a doctor where there weren't many doctors. I wanted to care for the people that don't have easy access to care: people without jobs or indoor plumbing, people who are outcasts and marginalized, people who aren't always literate, not necessarily clean, don't have the benefits of a wholesome childhood.

Perhaps you know the old saying that if you want to hear God laugh, just make plans. I didn't belong in the Emergency room at all. When none of the Emergency residency programs wanted me I had to find a program that would take me, which turned out to be

Family Medicine, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. It was the best place I could have trained, but I never would have chosen it if I'd been in charge.

I liked Iowa but I wanted taller trees and taller mountains, so I looked for work in Washington when I graduated. I started work in a family medicine clinic in Okanogan. That was ten years ago tomorrow . I promised myself it would be my last move.

One of the first people I met in Okanogan was a social worker and therapist named Ilene , who grew to be a good friend. Before long, Ilene introduced me to her cousin Liz in Seattle. Liz and I were married a few years later.

Liz had lived and worked in Seattle for more than 30 years and we couldn't find work for her in Okanogan , so I started looking for clinics closer to Seattle. The problem I ran in to was finding health provider shortage areas, because I'd made a 5-year commitment in exchange for student loan help. After a discouraging search in the Seattle area, I found a job in Aberdeen , still too far from Liz, but at least there were no mountain passes between us. I thought I would stay in Aberdeen for a year or two while I worked off my student loan commitment and looked for jobs in Seattle.

Can you hear God laughing again? Aberdeen is where I'm needed, where I think God wants me, where few other doctors want to work. I take care of people the gospels would call strangers and outcasts: people who make their way by picking our strawberries or cleaning fish, people disabled by logging accidents or mental illness.

There is a great opportunity here to serve people in need. Aberdeen isn't unique in that, there are plenty of people in need in the world.

Mark says, all who touched him were healed. I was healed when I stopped resisting God's plan, and I am continually healed. God's face shines in every patient every day and I know that God loves each one.

I hadn't thought it would be possible to get Liz out of Seattle , but she is here in Aberdeen now and engaging in community activities of many kinds. She is here and my life is full and joyful here.

In the Mark passage Jesus asks his tired disciples to come away from the crowds to a quiet place for a rest. He knows we need both work and rest.

There is so much need here in the Harbor, it would be easy to work all the time, but I try to keep a balance, to slip away to a quiet place often.

Are you working too much, or worrying too much? Is God calling you to rest? Or to make some changes?

It's never too late.

Amen.

