Racial Healing

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Preacher: Rev. Robert Krech

[0:00] So, this, let me open with this prayer from the Book of Common Prayer.

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus, your Son. Look with compassion on the whole human family. Take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts.
Break down the walls that separate us, unite us in bonds of love, and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth. That in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. So, this is the fourth sermon in this summer miniseries on the Holy Spirit and what would happen if we had more of the Holy Spirit.
So, just a quick recap. First sermon, I talked about the Holy Spirit himself and that's a great way to learn who the Holy Spirit is and what he is like is to look at the connection between Jesus and the Holy Spirit and the connection between Scripture and the Holy Spirit.
[1:09] The second sermon, I talked about inner healing or emotional healing and I pointed to the ways that Jesus is tender and compassionate towards us, any of us who have experienced wounding, and I gave some examples of what inner healing can look like.

And last week, the third sermon was on physical healing and where it was in Jesus' ministry and the early church and what it might look like today. And we prayed for each other during the time of the prayers of the people and two people have reported since then that they experienced some healing. So, I just want to say to all of you, for those of you who put your hands up for prayer, for those of you who prayed where you were or whether you came over to someone and prayed, I just want to say thank you and look what God can do in an Anglican service.
So, today's sermon is on racial healing. And this topic is not an intuitive or obvious topic that people connect with healing or even with the Holy Spirit.
And so, today's sermon, I want to go through a couple scriptures that talk about race and then I want to look at some instances in the book of Acts where the early church struggled with race and racial inclusion.
[2:20] So, where in the Bible does it talk about race? Where does it come from? So, when I was preparing this, I was surprised to find that two stray thoughts floated through my head. And they're not thoughts from God, they were just thoughts that my brain regurgitated in answer to the question.

These are not things I believe, but I remember it was my brain saying, if I was to answer the question, where does race come from? Here are two answers that I've heard in my lifetime as a Christian.
So, the first was from a sermon I heard a long time ago where the pastor was working through the book of Genesis. And he came to Genesis 9 and 10, where after the flood, Noah had kids, he had three sons, and these three sons were described as the origins of races in the sermon, not in the scriptures.
And this pastor went on to explain that Noah's three sons, Shem, became the people that populated Asia, that Japheth became the people who populated the Middle East and eventually Europe, and from Ham came the people who populated Africa.
And, you know, the story in Genesis goes on to say that Noah had too much to drink, Ham looked at him while he was sleeping, inebriated, and he cursed Ham and said that Ham would be the servant of the other two brothers.
[3:56] Now, I only learned years later, so this was a sermon I heard from a pastor in a church in Ontario. And I only learned years later that these scriptures and this line of thinking was used by enslavers to justify slavery.

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They were saying that enslaving black people was the fulfillment of this scripture. But I didn't know that at the time, but this pastor had preached this sermon about where race comes from, and he had referenced this scripture.
And the other place that I've heard it referenced was the story of the Tower of Babel. And just for those of you who want to know the commonwealth and correct pronunciation of Babel, it's Babel. So if you come to Canada, don't say Babel. They'll think you're going ba-ba-ba-ba-ba. Say Babel, and people will know what you're talking about. So we're all familiar with this story, but the upshot is that the people in that region were building a tower, and this was made possible by the fact that they all spoke the same language.
And so this project, this building project, came to an end when God confused their languages, and they weren't able to work together anymore. And as a result, people then were not able to talk to each other, and it says they spread out over the earth.
[5:07] And I've heard in other sermons as well that this is also one of the origin stories of race from the Scriptures. Now, just to say, this is flawed.

Both of these approaches are flawed. And for lots of reasons. You just can't read into the Scriptures and the story of Noah and his sons that the three sons were the founders of different races.
And you can't also say that you can reduce races to three different characters or people in the Noah account. And you can't also, and it's very problematic to say that one of these people, and therefore all their descendants, are cursed.
It establishes a hierarchy of human value that other parts of the Scripture simply reject. It's also not true to say that the diversity in languages comes from an act of judgment by God.
But when Pentecost came, one of the first things the Holy Spirit did was give people the ability to speak in other languages that they don't know. And you'd think if diversity of language was a problem, the Holy Spirit would have reversed it.
[6:13] And he didn't. So that doesn't work. So what are the true origins? The true origins of race in the Scriptures are actually with Adam and Eve. And whether you believe that there was a literal, exact Adam and Eve to people who are literally called Adam and Eve, or not, what Genesis does do is identify that the very first people God created don't have a race.

Nothing's mentioned about that. It just simply tells us that all of humankind started with Adam and Eve and extended from Adam and Eve. And therefore, like Adam and Eve, everybody is made in the image of God.
They resemble God, and they're of God. And they share in God's mandate as creator, and the assignment God gave them to steward the creation. Nobody's left out.
People are called to join in the work of creation as co-creators with God. But it also means that all those who are image bearers are of infinite worth and dignity.
But there's a further point, a further theological point, to this creation story. The image of God is a revelation of God, of who or what God is like.
[7:24] That humanity is racially diverse is a part of this revelation of God. And to not have one or another racial group is for the revelation of God to be incomplete.

To suppress, eliminate, or diminish any one racial group is to resist God's revelation of himself. We need each other. We need each other to know about God.
And we should marvel, and we should wonder at each other, and at our differences, and pay close attention to what we learn from other image bearers around us, what we learn from them about God.
As we go on through the rest of the Old Testament, I'm not going to do that here, but if you read the story of Israel, it's a story of Israel being formed by bringing people who are of different ethnicities together.
Israel is not ethnically or racially homogenous. Now, contemporary fields of study, genetics in particular, have shown that race is a construct, and people are genetically the same, regardless of skin color.
[8:24] Race is not a matter of three or four different groups. It's far more complex than that. And skin color actually exists on a spectrum of light to dark, and not in color groupings. And yet, in real life, historically and even now, there are lots of people who still make race-based judgments about people who are racially different from them.

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And this shows up even in scriptures. Scriptures talk about this. In Jesus' day, the Jews and the Samaritans hated each other with violence, and Jews looked down on Gentiles.
And so while the scriptures speak of all people being made in the image of God, by the time Jesus arrived on the scene, Israel and Jewish ethnic identity was well-formed as distinct and separate from other ethnic identities and contained, in that contrast, a sense of the other ethnic identities being not as good.
So how did that happen? How did we go from everyone's made in the image of God to a well-formed, distinct ethnic identity? So, to cover a lot of ground, to sum up, when Israel became a kingdom with a royal family as one kingdom among all the other kingdoms of the world, it gelled the 12 tribes into a bigger identity than just being a member of one of the 12 tribes.
And then, later, when they went into exile, Israelites were dispersed among other parts of the ancient Near East, and this meant that Jewish identity was a minority identity among a bigger majority Gentile culture, and retaining the practices and life of Judaism, retaining a pure faith in God, and even retaining your home language was very difficult.
[10:04] And so one of the effects of that experience, especially as people came back into Israel, was to double down on what it means to be Jewish, to double down on the practice of Judaism out of fear that the exile would happen again.

And this got an extra boost when Alexander the Great swept through and started Hellenizing that part of the world. So all these experiences, through these experiences, the practice of faithful Judaism came to be defined by an elaborate set of laws and customs that emphasized being separate from what was unclean.
And so, what did this mean for Jewish attitudes towards Gentiles? Well, we see from Scripture, because it talks about it, but even other contemporary writers like Josephus and Philo, that Gentiles were viewed as pagan.
They participated in religious and moral or immoral practices that made them spiritually defined, and to come into contact with a Gentile had a contaminating effect.
So you had to stay away from them. And the expectation, long term, was that God would come and reward faithful practicers of Judaism and bring down judgment on Gentiles who were doing evil.
[11:21] So this understanding was deeply, deeply ingrained in a lot of, in part of the Jewish identity at the time. So, why is it important to talk about this?

Because, to understand all of this helps us understand a couple things that were happening in the book of Acts in the early church. So most of us read the book of Acts because we want to read about healings and miracles or see how trace Paul and his journey around the region to plant churches, but we don't often see that the Holy Spirit was involved in this issue of racial healing.
So the early church, the very first followers of Jesus after his resurrection were largely Jewish and at that, largely Hebrew Jews rather than, say, Hellenistic Jews.
So what's the difference? Hebrew Jews were the ones who grew up and born and raised around Jerusalem and the region and Hellenistic Jews were the ones born and raised outside in the broader world.
They were very Greek and they spoke Greek and their customs and their mode of living was very Greek. So I'm going to walk us through a couple episodes in Acts where these racial tensions emerge and look at what happened.
[12:31] So, first friction point, Acts 6. In this chapter, we read that the community of early believers believers, and in particular, the Hellenistic Jews, complained that their widows were being neglected in the daily food distribution.

This was a big deal. Those who were being neglected were vulnerable and they depended on this food for their survival. You have to ask why this happened. The apostles who were in charge of the whole thing were Hebrew Jews, but they lived closely with Jesus for three years.
They knew that Jesus' ethic was love others as yourself. And yet, they somehow didn't notice that a whole part of their community was being neglected in the distribution of food.
This was an inequity. And it was causing tension. So it doesn't explain what the mechanical breakdown was, but that chapter in Acts is very clear that this issue fell along identity lines.
It was Hellenistic Jews who were complaining. And their reaction and their sensitivity is very clear. The word that we used in our translation is complained, but other translations use murmuring.
[13:47] And this kind of gets more clearly at the tension that existed. Murmuring, as some scholars have said, suggests that this was a complaint that came out of long-held grievances from

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the tensions that existed between them.

Hebrew Jews looked down on Hellenistic Jews as not being Jewish enough. And Hellenistic Jews would have looked down on Hebrew Jews for not being polished and cosmopolitan enough.
So resentment always brewed under the surface. And it would have been easy for the Hellenistic Jews to feel that this was not just a mistake or accidental, but maybe a little bit more.
So it's very striking to me from this passage that a group of people can know Jesus very intimately, have incredible spiritual experiences as followers of Jesus, even watch the Lord work miracles through them, and still not notice that a group of believers with a different identity from them is being overlooked in something like food distribution.
So we don't see, it doesn't mention in this passage that the Holy Spirit intervened to change things, but the apostles took some steps. They acted to preserve the unity of the body by creating a team of leaders that they drew from the community that had the grievance.
[15:01] And they gave authority and responsibility away to them. They opened up new leadership roles to members of the Hellenistic Jewish group, giving them voice and real power over this critical asset, food.

And so most people see the phrase the apostles used, serving the word versus serving tables, and they think that it's the apostles belittling the work. And if you know Anglicanism at all, this is one of these places where your bishop will tell you, well, this is where we get deacons from.
The priests do the work of the apostles, they minister to the word, and the deacons served at tables. So I was told when I was a deacon. Yep.
So I said, but what's interesting is that these roles were clearly not just a practical leadership role created to solve a short-term logistical problem. This was a new cohort of leaders in the community. And most of the seven leaders that were commissioned, all of them Hellenistic Jews, you read in later parts of Acts that they all went out moving in the power of the spirit, doing what the apostles did, evangelizing, praying for people, prophesying, healing people.
[16:13] They're a fully authorized group of leaders. And the apostles created this group and gave power away to them. And what the Lord did with this is noteworthy. If it wasn't for this crisis and the way the apostles handled it, no new leadership rules would have been created.

And without those new leadership roles and Hellenistic Jews in those roles, there would have been no evangelism to Gentiles later in Acts 11. This was an unintended consequence, but a good one, and one that the Lord was clearly in.
Next episode, this is a good one. Peter and Cornelius, Acts 10. So in this one, it's very instructive for us. Here you see the Holy Spirit actively at work to break down racial barriers.
So a couple key points in this story. Cornelius is a God-fearing Gentile, and he's told by an angel to go get Peter and bring Peter to his house. So messengers from Cornelius are on their way. Meanwhile, Peter's praying, and he has a vision where God tells Peter to not call anything unclean that God has made clean. And as the vision ends, the messengers, timing is amazing, the messengers show up and say, we're looking for Peter and here's why we've come.
[17:27] And then the Spirit says to Peter, verses 19 and 20, go with them without hesitation. So on that basis, Peter goes with the messengers to Cornelius' house. He shares the gospel.

And while he's doing so, the Holy Spirit falls spontaneously on Cornelius and all the Gentiles gathered there, just as the Hebrew Jews had experienced at Pentecost. So a couple observations. First of all, Peter's entirely blown away by this whole experience. And when he goes in the next chapter to tell the Jewish leadership, the Hebrew Jewish leadership back in Jerusalem what happened, they're also amazed.
It was so far off their grid, so outside of their frame of understanding things. Second, it's important to understand something about what the functioning of the Holy Spirit is in this.
For the early church, the signal mark of becoming a Christian was not water baptism, but receiving the Holy Spirit. And let me be clear, I'm not talking about speaking in tongues, I'm not saying that you have to speak in tongues in order to be a genuine Christian, not that at all.
[18:31] Leslie Newbigin, who was a bishop in the Church of India, and he wrote in one of his books that the parallel experience in early church to circumcision was not water baptism, but receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We are baptized by Christ into, baptized by the Spirit into Christ, we're made members of his body by the Spirit. And so for the Spirit to pour out like he did on the Gentiles sent a shockwave through

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the Hebrew Jewish Christians.
They didn't think it was possible for Gentiles to be saved. And they certainly didn't expect them to become followers of Jesus on equal footing with themselves. It was just not possible for them that people who were so unclean could become like them.
And it was this falling of the Spirit on the Gentiles that convinced Peter and the Hebrew Jews with him that the Gentiles were in fact saved. Third, Peter had the witness of Scripture that spoke to him of the Messiah being a light to the Gentiles.
And he heard Jesus tell him and the others that they would be his witnesses to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. He was there at Pentecost. He and his friends spoke in other languages about the Lord.
[19:46] And yet, his understanding of what it means to be a Hebrew Jew ran so deep in him that he still held the conviction that Gentiles couldn't be included.

It took a vision, not just one time, but a vision that God gave three times in a row for good measure, to shake Peter past his, I'm going to use this word, unconscious bias towards Gentiles.
Now, if you want to talk, you want to question what do I mean by that? Am I alluding to this or that? Am I getting into a dogfight over critical race theory or something? Come talk to me after.
I can guarantee you wherever you fall on these issues, my answer is not going to make you happy. If you love it or you don't love it, you're not going to be happy with what I have to say. So, just come talk to me, but just be warned.
So, one of the things that I find so interesting is that to have more of the Holy Spirit is for the Holy Spirit to work to break down some of our deepest beliefs and opinions about people who are racially different from us.
[20:51] When Paul says in Ephesians 2 that the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles is broken down, and then in Galatians and Colossians that in Christ there's neither Jew nor Greek, he's not talking about getting rid of racial identity or differences or colorblindness.

He's talking about a unity in Christ between people who retain all their created differences as image bearers of God. So, we come to Galatians 2, Peter and Paul.
Peter and Paul. So, even though when Paul recounted this, or when Peter, sorry, recounted his experience with Cornelius to the leaders in Jerusalem, it didn't quite, it was initially embraced, but it clearly didn't stick.
Because later we read, in Galatians 2, we read about a confrontation between Peter and Paul. It's not recorded in the book of Acts. Most scholars think that it happened during the timeline of Acts and before Acts 15.
Just to reference one person, N.T. Wright, go argue with N.T. Wright, he thinks that it happened before Acts 15. So, if N.T. Wright says it, it's probably true.
[22:05] So, this was a confrontation that happened because Paul and Peter are hanging out in Galatia. They're with Gentile believers. And then it says that some people from the group of James came from Jerusalem, and when they show up, Peter, out of fear of what they'll think of him, recuses himself and stops hanging out with them.

He stops eating with them and associating with them. And even, as Paul says, even Barnabas. Now, this is quite a big deal. James was the leader of the Jerusalem church, but he was Jesus' half-brother.
He sort of looked like Jesus. He carried a lot of authority. He was said to be a person of deep prayer, who knew the scriptures very deeply. So, if people said, we've come on behalf of James, and we think that you have to be circumcised and follow the law, it was a big deal.
So, this whole thing makes Paul mad. And he calls out Peter. And now, Paul wrote Galatians. He didn't transcribe this. He just wrote his side of things. And he says, I called out Peter.
I don't know what Peter said back to him. We don't even know how the whole thing ended. But Paul just kind of says, I called out Peter, and he was wrong, and so it is. And he goes on to all his arguments in the rest of Galatians.
[23:24] Now, most of us have probably read the book of Galatians as an argument about faith versus works of the law. And that's right. That is true. But the implication here is for the salvation of Gentiles and their inclusion in the family of God.

And Paul doesn't make a distinction. Unlike us, he doesn't separate a theological argument from an ecclesiastic or sociological reality. For him, they're all joined up.

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So, Paul is clear that salvation is by faith and not by works. But this should lead to a new family, a new people of God, and the Gentiles are part of this. And so, this is why he opposed Peter and those who came from James.
And so, this is something that Paul brings up in almost all his letters. It's something that dogged his ministry and the rest of his life. He fights against this for the rest of his ministry.
He fights for the Gentiles for the rest of his ministry. So, there are a couple things that we should understand about this group that comes from James. Paul sometimes calls them the circumcision group.
[24:27] So, these are majority culture Hebrew Jews. And for them, the thinking is something like, well, great that the Gentiles are saved, but they have to become Jewish to inherit the promises of salvation.

It was barely conceivable, as mentioned, that the Gentiles could become the people of God simply by faith. And even if they did receive the Holy Spirit, they still needed to assimilate.
And they needed to be circumcised and keep the law. And if not, then they need to segregate. So, Jewish identity for these people from James is normative, right, and even holy.
And the instinct to assimilate or segregate is something that simply accompanies beliefs of racial superiority. So, this thinking stuck with the church down through the ages.
In the early church, it was how can you be a Christian and not a Jew? Couldn't understand how you could do that. And then later, when Christianity became the official religion of the empire, it was how can you be a Christian and not a Roman?
[25:30] Again, the possibility that you could be a Christian and not a Roman citizen was hard to square. And then later, when missionaries went around the world, it was how could you be a Christian and not a European?

And this thinking continues on. How can you be a Christian and not also Canadian, American, white? I mean, fill in the blank. We all have our thing that we go to. I don't recognize, I don't see how the thing that you've got in your identity squares with my sense of God.
We should be on guard against that. The Jerusalem Council. This is Acts 15. We read about that this morning. This is the crescendo. This is the first church council. It's convened around this exact issue of racial identity.
There's no creedal formula that emerges, but more like a communique that clarifies the church's unified position on Gentile believers. So it's a showdown. Paul and Barnabas were fighting with a group from James and they said, you know what?
We're not getting anywhere. Let's pop this up a level. We're going to Jerusalem. Let's have it out right at the top and settle this. And everybody said, fine. So everybody gathered in Jerusalem.
[26:39] Long, heated debate we read in our passage. And then at some point, Peter comes back in and he tells his story again about Cornelius, the one that I just talked about. And then Paul and Barnabas start telling their stories of how the Gentiles came to faith and how they saw this in their ministry.

But in the end, it was James, the main leader, who connects Peter and Paul's experiences with the scriptures. He could have picked from lots of places. But the one he picked from specifically was this idea that the son of David, the Messiah, would rebuild the tent of David so that the Gentiles who are called by the name of the Lord could seek the Lord.
And this settles it. And they write up a communique. It was probably a compromised document, but it was a big win for Paul. It was a big win for letting Gentiles be followers of Jesus without having to change their racial identity, without having to become Jewish.
So a couple things strike me about this too. A spirit-filled, miracle- and healing, gifted community can persistently struggle with this issue. Peter had a powerful experience as he did in Acts 10, and still later on when he was in Galatia, under the right or maybe wrong circumstances, could slip back into his old, deep thinking when people from Jerusalem showed up.
The Spirit used the strong disagreement and the confrontation between Peter and Paul, two Spirit-filled people, to make progress on this issue. And the Holy Spirit can also use councils and meetings linking experiences to Scripture.
[28:18] So I want to close with some thoughts. I'm hoping that I've painted a picture here. You can have the Holy Spirit and move in the gifts of the Spirit, but still have deep and stubborn thinking patterns.

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I'm going to tell you a story. I was trying to decide, do I tell you this story? It's about me. When I was a kid, so I grew up in Ontario. When I was a kid, there was a part of the town south of us called Brampton.
And Brampton was nicknamed by people around me. It was called a reference, it was called Bramaladesh because it was thought that there were people from South Asia who lived there.
And I grew up hearing this term used. And so years later, years later, I'm here in D.C. And a friend of mine who's not from Canada says, oh, I was talking to a friend and he said that he's going to go to Brampton.
And out of my mouth pops, oh, Bramaladesh. And I froze. And I thought to myself, where did that come from? I mean, I had been, I was so shocked.
[29:23] This stuff, this word popped out of the deep parts of my brain and popped out just like that. And I wish, I wish, I couldn't believe I said it. I was so embarrassed.

I immediately apologized to him. He had no idea. He was so confused. He sort of stood there and watched me go through this whole thing. I'm agonizing. I'm, you know, beating myself up and very embarrassed.
And I thought, do I explain to him what this is, why this is such an awful term? And do I, and do it so that he understands what I'm going through? I didn't. I just simply said, sorry, that's not a right term for it.
It's Brampton. And that's, you know, and I, but I basically took it away as, you know what, you just, you just can't ever underestimate how deep stuff like this can be.
And if you'd asked me, if you'd started earlier and said, Rob, what do you think of calling Brampton Bramladesh? I would have said, that's terrible. What a terrible, you know, that's so wrong.
[30:19] You can't, you just don't, don't do that. And there it was, without even thinking, it just popped out. I think what's also really striking to me about all of this is that in the, when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, he didn't just come to do miracles and healings among new believers, but he worked among them to break down racial prejudice.

This was part of the package. He could use crises like food distribution for Hellenistic Jews. He could work through supernatural revelations, visions, and speaking quietly to Peter.
He could work through hard conversations and even church conventions. The Holy Spirit is definitely active on this issue in the book of Acts. And it's a work of the Spirit that we still need.
I've been doing some reading on the history of revival in the U.S. It's fascinating. When the Spirit of God pours out and is poured out in moments of revival, people were coming to Christ. And during camp meetings and tent meetings, white and black people were converted under the same roof and they would start sitting beside each other, preaching to each other, prophesying over each other, praying for each other, standing up and sharing testimony.
But at some point in every single one of these revivals, whether it's one of the Great Awakenings, whether it's the Azusa Street Revival, white clergy decided this integration stuff was no longer okay.
[31:45] And even though the Spirit of God was falling on everyone without distinction, they would reinstate the exclusionary and separate worship spaces. And when people were pushed out, when black people were pushed out of these revival meetings, revival would fizzle.

We can grieve the Holy Spirit with immoral choices like drunkenness, and we can grieve the Holy Spirit with refusals to confront racism in ourselves or our churches or elsewhere.
I've also had a number of conversations, probably like others, with black pastors of different denominations, in part asking about their experiences with the Holy Spirit and charismatic Christianity.
And they've said to me something very interesting. They've said to me about white charismatic leaders. If they have the Holy Spirit the way they say they do and seem to, because miracles operate through them, why are they so tone-deaf to issues of racism?
Why are cries for revival always about personal salvation and miracles and healings and not a cry for the end of racism? I think to have more of the Holy Spirit is to partner with God's heart to heal us, to heal all our wounds, including the wounds of racism.
[33:05] And the way I would say that we should seek the Lord for inner healing and physical healing and to have more of the Holy Spirit, to see more of the gifts and power of the Spirit operate, we should seek the Holy Spirit for more of racial healing.

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In the same way that God's self-revelation is incomplete without all the racial differences that he created, God's redemption and making of all things new is incomplete when the wounds of racism are not healed.
Let me close us in prayer. Lord Jesus, Lord Jesus, I thank you that you are willing to go with us to the hard places, into the hard places of pain in our lives, to the places where it feels like our faith is stretched thin.
You're willing to go with us into the places of our deepest need. And I pray, Lord, that you help us also be aware of the places of need in the lives of others around us, even when those places of need are not familiar to us, when they don't fit into our grid.
Sensitize our hearts and help us follow your prompting, the promptings of the Holy Spirit, to follow you into the fullness of healing, the full package of healing you have for us.
[34:25] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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