

“HEALING BROKENNESS”

Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:17-26; Luke 9:37-43; Luke 13:10-17;

John 9:1-7; Matthew 9:35-36

August 15, 2021

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Those are just a few of the many gospel accounts of Jesus healing people. If you weren't very familiar with the gospels, you might well ask: why so many healing stories? Isn't that kind of repetitive? Isn't one healing story a lot like another? But once you start to read them you begin to see that in fact these stories differ in significant ways. Each one has some distinctive little detail that catches your attention. The circumstances and the action are different enough to make it pretty clear that healing is not just one thing. It comes in different ways.

Sometimes Jesus heals with a touch. Sometimes simply with his words. In a couple of stories we didn't read, he heals at a distance or people are healed just by touching his clothes. Occasionally he uses mud or spit, which from our perspective seems a little gross and odd, but perhaps reminds us that healing sometimes comes in ways we don't expect.

Some of those healed came to Jesus begging for help. Some of them Jesus approached himself. Some were brought by friends or family members.

Sometimes Jesus indicates that a person was able to be healed because of their faith (in some cases boldly declared but at other times not demonstrated by much of anything beyond a simple request). At other times, though, he says nothing at all about faith, simply responding with compassion to an individual who seeks him out or whom he encounters along the way.

Many people in those days believed that illness or disability was a sign of God's disfavor, or a punishment from God for sin. Jesus explicitly rejects that idea. At other times, though, we do see him offering forgiveness along with physical healing – reinforcing what we've come to understand: that physical, emotional, and spiritual health are often deeply intertwined.

That may be one of the reasons that so many of us love these stories of healing, even if we don't always understand them or know what to make of them in the context of our own lives today. They seem, somehow, to speak to the whole person. They are honest about the kind of pain we, too, know about. And they witness to Jesus' presence, near to that pain.

Many people - from the earliest thinkers of the Enlightenment period beginning in the 16th century to Thomas Jefferson to Rudolph Bultmann and the 20th century “demythologizers” to the more recent “Jesus seminar” leaders – have tried to edit them out, interpret them metaphorically, provide more “rational” explanations for them, or otherwise remove them from the main plotline of Jesus' story.

But the healing stories play such a prominent role in the gospels (more so in Matthew, Mark, and Luke than John) that they can't be set aside without really changing the story. The gospel writers

clearly believed that these stories conveyed some understanding of Jesus that was crucial for their readers, or they wouldn't have included them. So we need to pay attention to these stories, too, when we're reading the gospels and trying to understand who Jesus is and what it means to follow him.

Why *are* these stories so important in the gospel? Why are they here at all?

Most of these stories involve just one person's healing, although there are a couple of places where we read, more generally, that Jesus went around the countryside healing people's diseases. But the gospels don't pretend that Jesus healed every physically and mentally ill person in Palestine. Plenty of people didn't get healed. And those who were healed did, all, eventually, die from something else. So what difference does it make that Jesus healed them? Why does it matter? Does it mean anything?

Most of the people we read about in these stories only make brief appearances, so we can only imagine the additional years with loved ones, perhaps getting married, seeing children or grandchildren born, doing meaningful work, helping neighbors, savoring sunsets, enjoying a walk in the hills, worshipping with the community, feeling included and whole. These are not little things but great gifts. The fact that Jesus gave these gifts to people who would likely not otherwise have experienced them is worth thinking about. It seems to say that our lives matter – that all the ordinary stuff of our moments and days has meaning and value.

When I think about Jesus giving those extra years or that greater mobility or restored eyesight or relief of pain to these people, I can't put that together with the kind of theology that attributes suffering to God's will. And I really can't put it together with "suffering in this life really isn't important; what matters is getting to heaven by and by." I don't think we see even a hint of that viewpoint in Jesus' interactions with the people he healed.

I do think we see an abundance of compassion in the details of these stories, in Jesus' perceptiveness and sensitivity to the particularity of each person's hurt and need. He *touches* a leper – a person whose skin disease has set him apart as "untouchable." When he heals the boy with the seizure disorder, he "gives him back to his father." He has seen both the child's illness and his parent's anguish. When he heals a woman who'd been so disabled she couldn't stand up straight for 18 years – 18 years! – his words acknowledge how limiting this has been for her; he sees her need for freedom. These are stories about physical healing, but the healing is so much more than physical.

We see in these stories that healing means many things: health, freedom, the ability to participate fully in community, forgiveness, acceptance, restoration, a new life.

And we see the power and compassion of Jesus as he brings that healing. Over the years there have been two main schools of thought about the purpose of Jesus' healing miracles. One says that he did them to demonstrate his divine power and authority, to show that he was the Son of God. The other says that they are meant to show his love and compassion for the world and especially for people who are suffering. I say, maybe it's both. Or rather, perhaps the *power* is in the *compassion*.

A couple of weeks ago, when John Best talked about Jesus casting out demons and healing mental illness, he raised the question: why doesn't Jesus heal all those we pray for? I don't know the answer to that question either, any more than I know why Jesus didn't heal everybody in all the towns around Galilee and Judea. But I like what John said about that question being directed back to us, as the church, the body of Christ.

We read the gospels to help us understand Jesus, because how can we follow him otherwise? The centrality of healing in Jesus' ministry probably ought to suggest to us that we who follow him are meant to have the same desire for healing and wholeness for the hurting people around us. It is very easy for us to regard, say, Covid cases, or infant mortality, or medical bankruptcies, or the incidence of depression, or addiction, as statistics. But Jesus' example reminds us that those statistics are not numbers but *persons in pain* whose suffering and whose hopes for their lives matter. To Jesus. And, hopefully, to us. We who follow Jesus can't take refuge in "issues" and "statistics" when we know that people are hurting.

Some of us, of course, are called to work that is specifically and directly about healing of bodies, minds, or spirits. I am so grateful for those people, and I firmly believe that God is in that healing work. But all of us who follow Jesus can share in some way the work of healing.

We can pray and care and help, when we encounter someone who is ill or hurting or grieving or struggling. We can be willing to see and hear people's pain. We can lend our voices to support health care for everyone. We can, in these days, follow public health recommendations, even if that means a little sacrifice, in order to protect the health of others. Like the friends who went to great lengths to bring the paralyzed man to Jesus, we can support others in getting the help they need. We can help someone else experience the presence of Jesus. We can work at being an inclusive church so that folks with disabilities can participate fully. We can help shine the light on the ways pollution and environmental destruction affect everyone's health, and poor communities disproportionately. We can support healthcare workers and advocate for better wages for the lowest-paid. We can stick with our friends whose journey toward healing is long or bumpy. We can be the people of faith who affirm that, yes, following Jesus *does* mean that people's lives and suffering in the world matter to God, and to us.

It seems to me that the place to begin is gratitude: Probably all of us have experienced healing of some kind in our lives – maybe a physical healing that seemed miraculous, or maybe healing that came through surgery, treatment, drugs, or the skill of medical practitioners. Maybe a therapist has helped you find a way out of paralyzing anxiety. Maybe prayer has brought you a longed-for peace. Maybe forgiveness has healed your relationship with God or with another person. Maybe time and grace are bringing healing to a deep grief. Maybe community or friendship or love helped to heal old wounds. Maybe leaning on God and a support group is helping you become free of an addiction. Maybe nourishing food and exercise has given you renewed health. Maybe you have known the healing power of touch. Maybe you have experienced, as I have, as studies have demonstrated, that being in nature is healing for body, mind, and spirit. And maybe – I hope - you have experienced the healing, forgiving, reconciling presence of Jesus in your life.

All those gifts of healing, and more, shouldn't be taken for granted. Even if we have illness or wounds that have yet to heal – and truly, who of us doesn't? – there *is* healing to be grateful for. In the stories of healing from the gospels, we see that often those who are healed go away “rejoicing” and “glorifying God.” And we see that they are instructed to get up, they are sent, they are freed, they are given back to their families and communities. Healing – any kind of healing – is not so much a happy ending as a beginning... an opportunity and an invitation to extend healing grace to others.

I hope that we can see ourselves in the healing stories of Jesus, that we can sense his compassion, his understanding, his desire for our lives to be lived in health and wholeness and freedom and joy.

But I have to say something else about that, offer just a little caution: We must take care how we appropriate for ourselves the healing grace and compassion of Jesus. We can't faithfully read these stories and think only of our own healing, or our own need.

Sometimes (more commonly, I think, in the parts of the American church that are white and affluent) there is this temptation to regard Christian faith as primarily a source of strength and comfort to help me “live my best life” – heal my wounds and overcome my personal problems, learn to take care of myself, find fulfillment, be happy and successful in the world. It's appealing (and popular) but this way of thinking deeply misunderstands the Jesus of the gospels. Yes, Jesus meets us with understanding and compassion. Yes, there is healing. But that's only part of the story. We can't forget that Jesus asks us also to “take up the cross,” to love our neighbors (and our enemies), to seek the kingdom, to live in obedience to God.

If our expectation is that Jesus will take away all our hurt, all our anxiety, all our weaknesses, smooth our way... we are looking for something that is not the gospel. Jesus, who invites us to follow him, lived a life that *led to a cross*. Nothing could remind us more clearly that woundedness and suffering are part of being human... and part of the life we are called to.

The good and healing news of the gospel is not primarily about our own personal comfort and happiness. We are called to a new life. We are sent to bear witness to the love of Jesus. We are empowered to be healers, in Jesus' name.

You may have heard somebody, talking about suffering and healing, use the expression “strong in the broken places,” which I guess is kind of related to that other thing people sometimes say: “what doesn't kill us makes us stronger.” I'm not so sure, really about either of those statements. I don't know that most of us can claim strength of that kind, or even if it's desirable from the point of view of faith. I mean, isn't it *Jesus'* strength we rely on, not our own? I wonder if it would be better, from the point of view of the gospels, to think of those broken and healed places in us as “tender” rather than strong. Tender with gratitude for healing, tender with hope in spite of everything, tender with receptiveness to the healing grace of Christ which we will never be done needing, tender with compassion for others.

Tender like Jesus. Amen.