

Healing, Hope, and Wholeness

2nd Kings 5:1-14 and Mark 1:40-45

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I have a good friend who is a self-described “charismatic Christian”. Residing contentedly on quite opposite ends of the theological spectrum, we were frequent sparring partners in seminary. One of the most frequent topics of debate between us was the subject of faith healing. My friend was and is a firm believer that whatever we ask for in the name of Jesus will be given to us by God. And so he sincerely believes that when a Christian lays hands on a sister or brother in faith and prays for healing, miracles will and do happen, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

I am simply not there, nor do I think I ever will be. Perhaps I am just too logical or cynical. I used to joke with my friend that I hoped to have enough brains to make up for my apparent lack of faith. But the questions we engaged in those discussions are no laughing matter.

If God does indeed grant healing to some through faith and prayer, why not all? Why would some prayers for healing be answered, and not all? Does God play favorites? What do we say to those who have desperately and frequently prayed for healing that never came? How do we reconcile what we know from science with miraculous healings testified to in faith? And why do bad things happen to good people in the first place?

Such questions can be fun to ask and debate in seminary classrooms, but they are dreadfully serious for those who stand in need of healing and hope. And though we come out at different places in the way that we answer these questions, my friend and I have a similar heart that motivates our engagement of them. We both care deeply about people, and we are moved with compassion when faced with suffering and brokenness. And though we bring different strategies and beliefs to such situations, we agree on this: when confronted with suffering, a faithful response is imperative.

Today’s scripture readings feature two stories of healing – two stories of lepers who were miraculously made clean. In truth, I have very little to say about the healing events in these stories, primarily because I continue to wrestle with them. I confess that I don’t really know what to make of all the miracle stories in our scriptures. A big part of me wants to go all Thomas Jefferson on the Bible and remove all references to the supernatural and miracles and faith healings and the like. But another and stronger part of me knows that I cannot do this, and that these stories, mysterious and confounding as they are, comprise a significant and central part of the gospel. They are quite literally “good news,” and no amount of debate or deconstruction or demythologizing can strip them of their enduring influence or significance.

Furthermore, I have personal experience with healing, and though I would not ascribe miraculous status to any part of my life journey, I have indeed experienced moments of profound awareness that I have been healed. And in those moments, I have known gratitude that I can only direct toward God. When I was a child and a young adolescent, I suffered from pretty severe asthma. I spent many nights conscious of and struggling for every breath, and I remember vividly the night that my doctor sat my family down and told my parents that unless we made some significant lifestyle changes, I would probably not survive to see my 21st birthday. It was sobering news for anyone, but for a farm boy who was told he could no longer participate in any of the family’s farming activities, it was world-shattering. But today, I no longer even carry an inhaler. I cannot deny that I have experienced healing.

Also an adolescent, I suffered from an extreme stuttering problem and a speech impediment that resulted in a vocal “tick” that at times made it impossible for me to vocalize words. Five of the longest minutes of my life found me at the front of the Hagerstown Church of the Brethren trying desperately to get through a children’s story where I was sharing about the rabbits I raised and how they could benefit families around the world through Heifer Project. And yet just a few years later, I found my speaking voice in the front of the same sanctuary during a sermon I was compelled to do for “Youth Sunday.”

Today, I use my voice for a living, and though I still have moments when my tick returns with a vengeance, particularly for some reason when using the telephone, I cannot deny that I have experienced healing.

But in 2005, my voice was compromised yet again by a stubborn bleeding polyp on my left vocal cord. A year of therapy, including two periods of extended and complete silence, and eventual surgery in 2006 brought physical recovery. But my spirit was fully restored until I was able to again sing tenor in the college Oratorio Choir's performance of Handel's Messiah just a few years ago. To this day, I cannot hear the hymn "My life flows on" without welling up with emotion and occasionally tears. But today, they are tears of gratitude, and in those moments, I cannot deny that I have experienced healing.

I share these parts of my life story simply because they are real and instrumental parts of my faith story. I have known brokenness, and I have known healing. My story is not particularly unique, nor would I call it miraculous. But it *is* my story. And when I think about healing, I cannot deny it.

And yet I remain troubled when I think about healing. I spent years wrestling with why God would have let my Grandfather become crippled with polio as a child, and marveling at the fact that he did not seem to harbor any bitterness at God for his fate. I continue to question why the prayers for healing of some are answered, while others continue to suffer and languish without relief. And when I look to the scriptures, I don't receive any easy answers. For while there are plenty of stories of healing such as we read today, there are likewise plenty of stories of those who lay themselves before God and don't get the relief for which they pray. The Psalmist cried out of the depths to God, "Why have you forsaken me?...I cry by day but you do not answer, and by night, but find no rest"¹ Jephthah tells her father to honor the vow he made to the Lord and loses her life as a reward.² Jeremiah curses the very day he was born.³ Job argues with God because his life is utterly ruined.⁴ Even Jesus pleads with God in the Garden of Gethsemane to let the coming cup of suffering pass from him, to no avail.⁵

The best insight I have come up with in thinking about these things is found in a word Mark uses in today's scripture passage to describe the disposition of Jesus when he is confronted by the leper who begs him saying, "If you choose, you can make me clean."⁶ In English, we read that Jesus was "moved with pity" or "filled with compassion" before he touched him and healed him. But the Greek word used – *splanchnizomai* – is much more nuanced. It identifies "a profoundly intense emotional response that viscerally propels one feeling compassion into action on behalf of others."⁷ Quite literally, it means that Jesus cared enough about the leper to do something about it. In this case, the leper was healed with a touch. But in the process, Jesus was himself made unclean – so much so that he was excluded from the town and had to stay out in the country. By reaching out to a leper, Jesus made himself untouchable, thus standing in solidarity with all those who were unclean.

I have no answers as to whether faith healings happen, whether such miracles are really possible, or why some experience healing and others do not. But I do know this and claim it as good news: God is not oblivious to human suffering. Just as Jesus was moved by compassion to reach out and stand in solidarity with the leper, God reaches out to touch us and stand with us in the midst of pain, suffering, and despair. And in the quest for healing, hope, and wholeness, the assurance that we are not alone is perhaps the greatest comfort we can know, and the best good news that we can ever proclaim.

So be it

¹ Psalm 22:1-2

² Judges 11:29-40

³ Jeremiah 20:14-15

⁴ see for example Job 30:20-23

⁵ Matthew 26:36-46

⁶ Mark 1:40

⁷ Fred Lyon, quoted by Gary W. Charles in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 1, p. 359.