

HEALING AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

“JESUS, THE HEALER”

First in a sermon series by James R Blades, Senior Pastor
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This morning, we begin a six week study of one of the most central and vital themes of the Christian Faith: the theme of healing.

One-fifth of the Gospel text is devoted to Jesus’ healing ministry; seventy-two accounts in total. Jesus’ healing ministry breathes through the whole Gospel record, which can only mean one thing: that the healing work of Jesus loomed large in the memories of those who encountered him.

Even Marcus Borg, who approaches the Gospels with a great deal of historical skepticism, admits: “Behind this picture of Jesus as a healer,” he writes, “is a strong historical core. Indeed, more healing stories are told about Jesus than about any other figure in the Jewish traditions. He must have been a remarkable healer.”¹

Healing was not just an incidental aspect of Jesus’ ministry but its very heart. He preached the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God, and He demonstrated it by his healing works of wonder.

Now I realize that a number of us, particularly those who have been trained in the scientific method, stumble a bit over the idea of miracles. But we need to understand that our modern-day concept of “miracles” is not the same concept that the people of Jesus day held, who witnessed those miracles.

The whole idea of a lawful universe, a closed system of cause and effect, the kind of universe we understand, did not develop until recent centuries. When we modern westerners think of miracles, we think of a suspension of the natural law. We think of an event that runs counter to the scientific methods we have all been taught. But no such scientific concept was part of the thinking of anyone in the world of Jesus’ day. Whether you were a Jew or a Greek or a Roman, your concept of the universe was one ruled not by laws but by gods and spirits. The sun didn’t rise because the laws of physics but because the gods willed it. The harvest didn’t succeed or fail because of the rules of agriculture, but because the spirits of harvest were pleased or displeased. A person got sick, not because of bacteria or virus or genes, but because one had sinned and affronted a deity.

So when the people witnessed Jesus’ miracles, they were not astounded by God’s suspension of natural laws; they had no such concept. They were astounded by the fact that a power from beyond this world was wondrously interrupting the accustomed and tedious course of their lives.

Here’s something else that astounded them: that God should even be *interested* in healing their ills. Why? Because they held it as a working assumption (as many of the world’s cultures and religions still do today) that if a person was sick, it was the verdict of God. Why try to change ones ordained fate?

The Hebrews, for their part, believed quite simply that health was the blessing of God and that illness was God’s judgment, an idea that was deeply rooted in their laws and traditions.

¹ Marcus Borg & N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus* (Harper San Francisco, 1999), pp. 66-67.

No one, for instance, could be a priest before the God of Israel who was deformed or ill. No one was thought worthy to approach holy things if physical handicap had shown them to be profaned by sin.²

"If you will give earnest heed to the voice of the LORD your God," says the Jewish Torah, "if you do what is right in God's sight, and give ear to God's commandments, and keep all God's statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians ..."³

In the Hebrew mind, health was the reward of God and sickness was God's punishment.

Do you see, then, why Jesus healing and deliverance miracles were so startling? Because here was Jesus preaching "The kingdom of God is here among you," and the chief mark of that visitation was a total reversal: not God's judgment and scorn of the sick and suffering (which they expected), but rather God's tender care and healing intervention (an astonishing surprise).

I get uncomfortable when I hear someone say, "God sent this sickness as a trial of my faith. God sent this illness as a cross to bear." Let the ministry of Jesus remind us that, far from sending illness, God came to vanquish it!

Here's something else we modern western Christians miss when we interpret Jesus' miracles. We think that Jesus did his miracles to impress the multitudes, to give credibility to his kingdom preaching, an idea which is asserted, incidentally, by the founders of our Protestant faith, both Luther and Calvin. But if this were true, if Jesus were doing his miracles to give credence to his messianic claims, then why does Jesus repeatedly tell his miracle recipients to keep quiet about it? "Go, he often said, "and tell no one about this."

No, Jesus had to have had quite another motive for healing than the showcasing of his kingdom powers. And what was that motive?

"As a father has compassion on his children," said the psalmist, "so God has compassion on God's children."⁴

When you have a child or grandchild that is sick, what emotion are you moved to? When you have a child or grandchild or dear one that is suffering, what do you feel? Is it not compassion? A compassion that would go to any lengths to spare them that suffering if you could?

Here's why Jesus healed: Because He was filled with God's compassion over God's suffering children; a compassion that moved God to step into the suffering of this world to begin with, and moved Jesus to grapple with it.

Even when it created conflict with the religious establishment, Jesus healed.

Even when it brought threat to him, Jesus healed.

Even when it cost him his life, Jesus healed.

Which brings us to this morning's Gospel reading, which so clearly illustrates everything we've been talking about.

Here is Jesus teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And here is a woman who for eighteen years has had a oppressive spirit that has bent her over so that she cannot straighten up at all. Jesus calls her forward in the midst of the congregation and says, "Woman, you are freed from your sickness." Immediately, she stands straight

² See Lev. 21:18-23

³ Exodus 15:26 of the Hebrew Bible

⁴ Psalm 103

and begins glorifying God. The synagogue officials are indignant because Jesus has healed on the Sabbath. But Jesus says, "You hypocrites, does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the stall and lead him to water? And should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, be released from her bondage on the Sabbath day?"

Do you not detect the tender compassion in those words? What an effect they must have had on this afflicted old woman who had all those long years imagined her affliction a sign of God's rejection and who had suffered the exclusion of a religious community who heartily agreed with that dreadful presumption. Jesus not only healed her but marvelously included her in the esteemed community, calling her a daughter of Abraham!

That is why the people were amazed at Jesus' wonderworks. That is why they were awestruck by his ministry. Not only because he worked impressive miracles. But because his miracles were a reversal of everything they'd learned to think about the will and intention of God. Good News, indeed!

So what does all this have to do with us? Here? Now?

First, it reminds us of something very important about God's healing intention towards *us*: that though this world is filled with pain and suffering that is part of our mortal humanity, God does not send these ills to train or punish or refine. God's Son came to oppose these things and through his cross and resurrection to banish them forever.

Second, not only was healing a centerpiece of Jesus' ministry, it was the commission he handed his disciples. "Whatever city you enter," he told them, "... heal those who are sick, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'"⁵

It is clear that the church of the early Christian centuries took Jesus' command to heal quite to the heart of their ministry. The writer of Acts in the New Testament goes to lengths to demonstrate that the very wonders Jesus began to do, his disciples continued to do. The letter of James to the churches urges those who are sick to call for the elders of the church to come and anoint them with oil, to be prayed over for healing. So central was this anointing ritual, in fact, that it came to be viewed as one of the church's sacraments right alongside baptism and communion: the sacrament of *Unction*.

Nearly all the early church historians—Clement, Irenaeus, Jerome, Tertullian, Augustine-- make reference to healing wonders that continued to be witnessed in the church of the early centuries. And even if we are doubtful that these wonders really happened, it is hard to doubt their signal importance to the church's understanding of Jesus' ministry in their midst.

Something else is clear, as we look at the unfolding centuries of the church's history: that this early emphasis on divine healing in the church not only moved off center stage but, gradually, off the stage altogether, so that the church's ministry came to be viewed no longer as a ministry of preaching, teaching and healing, but just of preaching and teaching.

How did this happen?

First, most of the influential theologians of the early church centuries, as I said last week, were steeped in Greek philosophy. To the Greeks, a human being was not a holism (as the Hebrew would think) but a dualism, not of one part but of two: the body and the soul. To the Greeks the soul was good and the body was evil. The soul was

⁵ Luke 10:8-9

eternal and the body was dispensable. As the church fathers brought this dualistic thinking into their Christian theology, the redemption of the soul became increasingly important and the healing of the body less so. Until finally you come to the 13th century Thomas Aquinas, a towering influence on the thinking of the later church, who said: “As much as a soul is of more account than a body, so much is the forgiveness of sins a greater work than the healing of the body.”

Something else happened that dimmed the importance healing in the ministry of the church. The utter collapse of Roman civilization in the latter half of the first millennium, the resulting conflict and slaughter among perpetually warring European fiefdoms, the onslaught of the Islamic conquest of Europe, the terrifying plagues that swept away whole populations, what did they call that era? **The Dark Ages.** Yes, and they were DARK! So much so that living was no longer as preferable as dying. Being healed in this world was not as preferable as being blessed in the next. In a world filled with terror and pain and sickness, death came to be viewed as a welcome release.

No wonder during these dark centuries the Roman Catholic sacrament of *unction*—anointing for healing—became the sacrament of *extreme unction*—anointing for dying.

Then came the Protestant Reformers like Luther and Calvin who threw out not only the sacrament of unction, but the whole practice of healing as part of the church’s ministry. Calvin wrote in his Institutes: “The gift of healing disappeared with the other miraculous powers which the Lord was pleased to give for a time, that it might render the new preaching of the gospel for ever wonderful. Therefore, even were we to grant that anointing was a sacrament of those powers which were then administered by the hands of the apostles, it pertains not to us, to whom no such powers have been committed.”⁶

Is it true? Is the healing power of Jesus that was so central to his ministry and to his call upon his disciples’ ministry, is the healing power of Jesus now only a bygone memory? Pardon me for disagreeing with our beloved Calvin, but I think not.

Repeatedly, I have seen people healed in remarkable ways by the ministering prayers of the Church, and you’ve seen it too. Some of the most powerful worship services I have ever attended, of all denominations, have been healing services where the sick and harassed come to be anointed with oil and prayed for. Not all prayers of which resulted in the physically miraculous but nearly all of which brought a demonstration of God’s transformative healing love to the suffering person.

Healing was the heart of Jesus. And healing is still the heart of his ministry today in His community, the Church. That is why we have put it right at the heart of our church’s mission statement. “Our mission is to glorify Jesus Christ and to be instruments of God’s *healing*, reconciling, life-giving presence in the world.”

If there ever was a time for the Church to reclaim and recover the centrality of its identity as Jesus’ healing community, now is the time. If there ever was an era of greater worldwide brokenness to which the healing message of Jesus could be spoken and applied with power, this is the era. “As the Father has sent me,” he said to his disciples, “so I send you.”

During the coming weeks, let us reflect on what this means for us!

⁶ Calvin’s Institutes IV.18 (1953) 2:36