

HEALING AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

“HEALING AS JOURNEY”

Fourth in a sermon series by James R Blades, Senior Pastor

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Text: Matthew 7:13-14

Sometimes the largest of life's truths can be portrayed in a single image. Jesus' image of two gates, two paths and two destinies fits that category. It tells us a great deal about his concept of life and salvation. Look at the components of these two short verses.

First there is the gate. Gates are passageways between one room and another, between one realm and another, one way of life and another. Gates represent decision. You either decide to stay on the side you are on or go through to a different side. Jesus says there are two gates. One is the gateway to Life with a capital “L”: Life as in fullness of life. Life as in wholeness and richness of life. Narrow is that gate, says Jesus. You don't just wander through it. Wholeness of life is something you must always make a choice for, and it is rarely an easy choice. The other gate, says Jesus, is the one that leads on to destruction; to the diminishment of life, the damage and obstruction and constriction of God's life-giving purposes. That gate is so wide that you can aimlessly wander through. The choices we decide not to make or defer to make or put off making end up being choices.

The next part of Jesus' allegory is very important. Not only is there a gate, a choice, that gets you on the pathway to life; there is a long and hard path that follows. It's important because it corrects some popular theological notions of salvation. Many of us got our Christian training with the idea that when we made the decision to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, that was all we had to do to be saved. Or that when we were baptized, that's all we had to do to be saved. The idea of eternal security is a very Calvinist notion, and one that doesn't quite match up with Jesus' picture here. Eternal security has a gate of decision and a destiny of glory but it leaves out the most important part of the salvation picture: the path of that it will take to get us from here to there. There's a decision that gets you on the path, and the destiny to which that path leads and there's the difficult journey in between.

Think of it this way. When a child is born into the world, that birth is a gate: The passage from womb to world. But birth is not the end of the matter. It is merely the beginning. A long struggling journey stretches out between that birth and the fulfillment of a life's potential. A thousand choices with all their consequences are part of that journey.

That's the picture Jesus paints of Life and Salvation. Beginning and destination, and the arduous journey between.

Now, what does this have to do with healing? A couple of weeks ago, we pointed out that in the New Testament, salvation *is* healing. The two are synonymous. Salvation is not just sparing us to heaven when we die, it is God's Spirit at work in us everyday through all the challenges of Life's journey, making us more complete, more like Christ, more responsive to God's grace, more empathetic with the failings of others, more realistic about our expectations of life, more trusting of God's good purpose and providence.

Now if we endorse the fact that salvation is healing in progress, then this image of the two gates and paths and destinies becomes an image of God's healing work in our lives, from which I want to draw several important points.

I. First, Jesus' allegory reminds us that healing is always a choice and often the more difficult one.

Have you been wounded somewhere along life's pathway? If so, don't feel picked on. Every human being that has ever walked this earth has been wounded, has been hurt. Physically hurt for sure. We all have scars on our body to prove it. The scar in the middle of my forehead is where I ran into the corner of a television set when I was first learning the adventure of running. The scar under my chin was left when I was riding a tricycle down a steep driveway and another kid pulled in front of me with his toy tractor. I was thrown forward and landed right on my chin. I was four. This scar on my hand is where Susy Smith bit me when I was eight. I was teasing her because I thought she was cute. Okay, that's all the scars I'm going to show you. You have your own. Our scars remind us that we have all been physically hurt. We've been emotionally hurt too, all of us; and those scars are just as real. We've been relationally wounded, all of us. Sooner or later, people disappoint our trust or fail our expectations or betray our confidence. And then there are our moral wounds: Our own sinful, selfish, hurtful choices that have left us with scars of guilt and remorse.

Here's the point: We don't get to choose whether we're going to be wounded in this life. But here's the choice we do have: We can tend to our woundedness, or we can neglect it. We can face our pain with Jesus as our healing partner, or we can deny it. We can recognize our hurt feelings or we can bury them deep until they leech up into our daily lives. We can mend what we've harmed or we can leave it broken. We can treat what is infected or we can leave it to fester.

I submit to you that the gateway of decision that leads onto the path of healing is not just something we go through once in life and we're done. It's the choice we make whenever we are hurt, whenever we are sick, whenever we are confronted by our failing or our woundedness. It's the choice we make to reach for wholeness whatever the cost. And where do you find this gateway of life? Not at a temple. Not on a mountaintop. Not over yonder; it's always right where you are. "Closer is Christ than breathing; and nearer than hands and feet," said Tennyson.

Once upon a time a lost driver stopped to ask a local farmer by the roadside for directions to Boise. "Well," replied the farmer pulling his chin, "if I were going to Boise, I wouldn't start from here." The good news is that, whether you're looking for Boise or seeking a whole and purposeful life, wherever you are, wherever you've been, the healing journey begins right where you are and it begins with a choice.

II. Here's something else Jesus' image of gates and roads and destinations reminds us of. Healing is always process. Sure there are times when healing is immediate. Sure there are times when Jesus touches us with God's wonderworking power, and we are instantly healed. But even these more immediate healings are temporary, aren't they? We get sick again. We get hurt again. Whether we're talking about physical healing or emotional healing or mental healing or relational healing, it's all process, it's all struggle, it's all work – work that is never done as long as we live on this side of glory. That's what Jesus meant when he said "Hard is the road that leads to Life."

In the early years of my healing journey, particularly while I was in seminary, I suffered the pain of a lot of brokenness from my growing up years. The more I got in touch with the pain in small groups and therapy, the more I longed to get through it to a place of inner serenity. I lived in hope for the day when I would have the healing encounter that would remove my brokenness in a stroke, and finally put me in the place where I could say, "I've been healed." I was looking for *the* conference, or *the* group, or *the* book, or *the* therapy, or *the* counselor, or *the* spiritual experience that would work magic in my life so that I wouldn't hurt any more, struggle anymore, fall short anymore. There were occasions when I had very powerful experiences of inner healing and insight; times when I know I was touched by the healing hand of God. But after the glow of each experience wore off, like the disciples who came down from the mount of transfiguration, other disappointing conflicts and doubts awaited me in the valley, and I would feel discouraged and slighted by God.

What I didn't realize then, but have since come to see, is that wholeness does not come all at once. It comes in steps and stages. Sometimes the steps are big and progress is clearly visible. But often the steps are so small and the progress is so slight as to be mostly invisible. Sometimes we cover miles. Sometimes we scratch for every inch of ground and lose some. But it's *all* part of the journey.

When I finally accepted this fact, the inner climate of my life became a lot more restful. I no longer lived with a constant sense of disappointment in myself that I wasn't all put together. Nor was I as prone to be disappointed with others, that they weren't all put together. When I accepted the reality that healing is not event but process, not arrival but journey, I was freed from *my own* unrealistic expectations. Others were freed from them too.

Alcoholics Anonymous has a phrase that boils it down to a few words: "*PROGRESS NOT PERFECTION.*" I frequently appeal to those words.

III. Here's something else very important about healing. It's God's work, first of all. "I am the God who heals you," says the Lord. Jesus is the Great Physician. We can bind a wound but only God can heal it, true. But here's the other part: Healing must be our work too. If we are praying for God's healing power to descend on us while we passively watch and wait, good luck. If we are waiting for God's shalom and peace to descend on this earth while we fold our hands and pray, good luck. Healing and wholeness and peace only come when God's power is clothed with our own choices and tenacity and hard work.

"... work out your own salvation," said Paul, "for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *God's* good pleasure." That's the deal. When we do God's work, God works in us. When we will God's will, God wills in us. When we set out to accomplish God's healing purpose in our lives, relationships and institutions, God's working and willing become active in our initiative. It's a dynamic partnership, a cooperative venture all the way down the road.

When my daughter was a little girl, I mail-ordered a scooter from the Christmas catalogue. It arrived UPS a mere two days before Christmas. Strange, I thought: the size and shape of the shipping box did not at all resemble the size and shape of the toy that was supposed to be inside. There must be some mistake. When I opened the box to investigate, I was disappointed to find, not the nicely assembled toy I had seen in the catalogue picture, but "a thousand" parts and pieces along with an assembly instruction booklet. I checked the catalogue listing more carefully, It said: *Assembly Required.*

How many of God's gifts to us are *assembly required*!

Our talents and abilities are gifts from God. We didn't earn them. They came with the package. But they never become truly useful until we discover what they are and develop them by constant and painstaking practice. Assembly required.

God gives us "our daily bread." God programs the capacity for life and growth into every seed that produces the food we eat. All of human ingenuity could not produce a single such seed. But the seed must be planted and cultivated by human hands. It must be gathered and processed and prepared by human effort. Assembly required.

God gives the gift of healing. Whether it is the astounding recuperative powers of our physical bodies or the ability of the mind to rebound from crippling despair or the rebirth of a dead relationship or the recovery of lost hopes: all are gifts of God. Without the generous and compassionate involvement of the Great Physician in our lives, healing would not be possible. But healing is like God's other gifts: in order for God's healing power to be active in our lives, we must cooperate with it, must choose to take an active part in discovering what God is doing, unfolding God's healing resources, and *putting* them to work. Assembly required.

Next week, we'll talk more about this healing process and how we can take our part.

Shall we pray?

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

St. Francis of Assisi - 13th century