

According to Your Faith

Questions of the Congregation Series

I'd Love to Hear a Sermon about: Faith and Healing

by

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Matthew 8:5-13

⁵When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him ⁶and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.” ⁷And he said to him, “I will come and cure him.” ⁸The centurion answered, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.” ¹⁰When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. ¹¹I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹²while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” ¹³And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.” And the servant was healed in that hour.

Has there ever been a time – quite like this one – when we were so desperate for God’s healing power? This global pandemic has brought with it so much illness and death, so many things unsettled and so much uncertainty. Where on earth is God’s healing power just now amid this pandemic that has isolated us for months and, in so many places, is getting worse? Furthermore, the ramifications of the corona-virus have a ripple effect on so many other forms of ill health.

The pandemic is escalating the numbers of people dealing with serious mental health issues. The economic toll is so great, I heard an economist say the other day, it is impossible to measure. Unemployment, poverty, housing and food insecurity are all on the rise with no downward slope for our country in sight.

Our nation’s political divisions and civil unrest have been laid bare. With gridlock in Washington, and our festering four-hundred-year-old sore of slavery and systemic racism, which have mercifully returned to the foreground again, calling us to participate in its desperate need for healing.

In the midst of all that is before us, with millions of people suffering from real physical illness, and a human community that is yearning for a just and equitable social and political order, what do we believe about the power of Jesus to heal, and how is God’s healing manifested in our faith?

As most of you know, I am privileged to be in a group of twenty-some pastors who gather annually to engage the scriptures deeply, and talk about how to preach in the seasons that stretch out before us. Just this week one of the younger members of our group sent out a laundry list of all that is wrong in our nation and the world and wondered how any of us were daring to address these concerns from the pulpit. A most thoughtful response came back from a pastor, now retired – my dear friend Jon Walton who no longer has to preach into this void, but who pondered our younger colleague’s assessment saying: You have

shared “an excellent description of the anxieties and problems we are facing as social and political beings. But in my imaginary sanctuary, from which I am barred for the time being, I slip into the pew and long for some word of hope, encouragement and faith... I want to know what I do as a faithful believer in God. I do not want to hear only the preacher’s anger at the current world and national crisis, and her political analysis week after week. For that I could stay home and watch Meet the Press. Maybe what we need most is to send up a flare every Sunday that lights the landscape around us, and then it is gone – just enough light to help us get by... just enough light to help us get by until the next flare in the sky...”

Jon goes on urging his preacher friends to consider “the qualities of faith, courage, hope, love, peace, righteousness, wrath.... Like the folks coming back from the exile, we are longing for the rebuilding of the temple and for a song or two whose melody we know.”

Friends, as I understand this gospel story about Jesus healing the centurion’s servant, it sends up a flare and lights up the landscape around us. It reminds us of those gospel melodies we know. It lights up the landscape and resounds with a promise of God’s healing presence that inspires us to the qualities of faith – courage, hope, love, peace, righteousness, even wrath at the cruel unpredictability of human existence.

The light and the melody is God’s power to heal revealed uniquely in the authority of Jesus. There is not one thing recorded in the Bible that Jesus does more frequently than healing. Fully one third of the gospel accounts have to do with healing, and almost always there is an explicit connection between Jesus’ acts of healing and faith. You remember that on many occasions we have heard Jesus say, “Your faith has made you well.” And in this particular story, Jesus heals the centurion’s servant without going anywhere near him, but merely based upon the faith of the one who asks.

What is the connection between faith and healing?

Well, according to the Bible, God’s healing power is about both – reconciling broken human relationships and restoring individuals to bodily wholeness, emotional well-being, mental functioning and spiritual aliveness. Faith is not so much a static, heady thing as it is a verb that requires us to join in God’s work to reconcile broken human relationships and restore individuals to wholeness. When Jesus says, “Let healing come for you according to your faith” what he means is – “You are made whole by my presence and my power.”

Madeleine L’Engle tells a story about a young man who was called home from college to see his father in the hospital. His father had been ill for a long time. The son was warned that this was probably the end, and he felt rebellious and angry. His father was only in his fifties, an active and brilliant man. It was not time for death to come into this family. But when the young man got to the hospital and saw his father, his anger began to recede. He said later, “I find this very difficult to explain, but I knew that my father was healed. I told this to my sister, and she said, ‘But Dad’s dying, the doctor says so.’ And I tried to tell her – that it didn’t make any difference. I knew that Dad was dying, that death was very close, but I also knew that Dad was healed. And so it was going to be all right. In recounting this story, Madeleine L’Engle noted that while healing means “to make whole,” being healed is not the same thing as being cured.¹

Healing has a physical dimension to it, to be sure, but it also has a spiritual dimension to it, and one can be healed without being cured.

We pray for healing a lot these days, I know. We pray for ourselves, for our spouses, our parents and children, for dear ones and friends we love all of whom we cannot imagine living without. We are

¹ Madeleine L’Engle, *The Irrational Season*, p. 127.

also praying for so many nameless hundreds of thousands who are threatened by the pandemic sweeping our world. We understand that our faith leads us to a place – as Madeleine L’Engle shows – that healing is more than just getting better after you’ve been sick. Because the word the gospel writers use to signify healing is still not the same as a cure. It is much bigger and broader than that. To be healed ultimately means to be made whole – whether that be a sick person or a deeply wounded and broken human community desperately yearning for social justice and fairness and redemption.

Professor of Religion at Duke University, Allen Verhey has written extensively about the healing ministry of Jesus in what he calls “the strange world of sickness in scripture.” Into this strange world of sickness, he writes, “Jesus came announcing that the good future of God was ‘at hand.’ When Jesus healed the sick and preached good news to the poor, Jesus showed what God’s good future would be like, and showed himself as an agent of that future. In the healing ministry of Jesus the power and purpose of God were disclosed. God’s cause is life, not death; God’s cause is human flourishing, including the flourishing we call health, not sickness. And when God raised Jesus from the dead, that cause was assured.”²

In a word, God wants us to be well. God wants the human family to be well together. And when we are not well, according to our scripture reading, Jesus finds ways to disclose his power to heal by encouraging us to faith.

To live our lives counter to all the illness of the world with courage, hope, love, peace, righteousness, even wrath when it propels us to share these gifts of faith for the healing of others. We may not always get what we ask for; we may not always be cured of what ails us, but the promise of the gospel is that when the realm of God arrives in full, all will be well.

² Allen Verhey, *Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life*, p. 79 ff.

In the meantime, each one of us can be an instrument of healing by our faith.

AMEN.