

“The Healing We Need”

June 27, 2021

Scripture: Mark 5:21-43

I have to admit I'm a little ambivalent about this story. On the one hand it is a lovely, touching story where a woman who has suffered for twelve long years is finally released from her condition and healed; where a child is brought back to life. What could be a more powerful display of Jesus' love and compassion than that? But on the other hand, it's easy to interpret this story as a judgment on those of us who, in spite of our prayers and faith, have not been healed or have lost someone we love never to hold them again. And I don't doubt that there have been preachers over the years who have lifted Jairus and this woman in the crowd as examples of faith we must emulate if we want to experience God's love in our lives, leaving those of us who fall short feeling inadequate and forgotten.

But I can't believe the gospel writer intended this story to be a source of frustration and disappointment and not hope. And if that's true, if the purpose of telling this story is to instill hope, then it must be saying something more about the nature of faith and of healing instead of simply offering these people as examples to follow. What does it mean to have faith? And what does Jesus mean when he tells this woman, “Your faith has made you well?” Is faith quantifiable; can it be weighed and measured? It seems to me faith is a lot like love the way Paul describes it in First Corinthians. There, he says love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. I think those are the qualities of faith Jesus is talking about. He's impressed by the woman's persistence, her inexhaustible willingness to keep seeking an answer to her affliction in the hope she'll finally find one.

And based on her description that's pretty remarkable. She'd lived this way for twelve long years. She'd spent all she had on useless remedies. Doctors had done Lord knows what to her in attempts to cure her; and that was the competent ones. There may have been a slew of quacks who were only interested in taking her money. But despite all that she refused to be discouraged or give in to hopelessness. Her faith persisted against all odds. Maybe at times it waned or wavered but she hung onto it. And when the opportunity arrived to reach out in faith, she squeezed her way through the crowds to do it.

Her faith healed her, or at least made it possible for her to find healing. And even if her physical condition had been unchanged, her faith would have remained. She wasn't there to put God to the test or as a last resort, keeping faith had become a way of life for her. That's what Jesus sees in her, and what he encourages in Jairus even when news comes of his daughter's death: “Do not fear,” he tells him, “only believe.”

How do we best understand the relationship between faith and healing? Jesus seems to say that faith is an act of will, something we choose. And when we choose faith, healing comes; but maybe not in the form we expect. Years ago I attended a lecture by an Anglican priest in

Canada who gave motivational talks. He opened his remarks by informing us all that he had about six months to live. He had been diagnosed with cancer which was inoperable and untreatable, this was about 30 years ago, and didn't expect to make it through the next year. He told us that receiving that news left him with a choice. He could either be embittered and disappointed over having such little time or he could be grateful and cherish the time he had left. He chose the latter, as you can imagine. He put it in a way that I guess is a little trite, but memorable: I can either be sad and upset that a rose bush is full of thorns or I can marvel that a thorn bush produces such a beautiful flower. What we choose matters. It may not change the outcomes in our lives, but it can bring us the healing we need to live each day fully.

Of course, that was a religious person who was in some ways trained his whole life to reach that conclusion. When I think about people close to me who have walked that road I think of my dad. I've told you about him before, sometimes from the pulpit, sometimes in other settings. Dad was an alcoholic whose condition really became evident, at least to me, when I was about 12. Growing up in our home I watched him struggle for years with a reality he couldn't change. He went through several treatment programs during that time. He would get sober and stop drinking for a while, but he never really let go of the bitterness and resentment that was at the root of his addiction. So, even though he wasn't actually drinking during those intervals he was still what's called a "dry drunk."

Finally, though, he entered a program when I was about 22 or 23, just starting seminary, that really seemed to get through to him. He finally came to terms with his past and with all the messages that had been engrained in him as a child and kept him from accepting himself and his background. I remember him telling me once that he had never realized how much shame he carried and he was basically trying to numb himself to through his drinking. After finishing that program he was different. He had chosen a new path for himself.

But he came to a crossroad the winter of 1987 and 88. He was about 63 years old and looking for work. He went to a job interview in Ohio, we live in Illinois, but when he got there he discovered the job had been eliminated. It really discouraged him and he just dropped off the radar for about three weeks. My mom didn't hear anything from him. Finally he called to say he was coming home but he needed to get into detox first. That might sound bad, but it wasn't a failure. He knew he made a mistake and what he needed to do to correct it. He realized making a mistake didn't mean he was worthless. He refused to give in to discouragement and persisted in the faith he'd found in the possibility of sobriety.

A few months after that dad was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. He never took another drink but the next ten years he would struggle through the ravages of cancer that finally took his life in 1998. That may sound like a sad ending, but those last ten years were the most peaceful and happy years of his life, I am absolutely convinced. He had been healed of the bitterness and resentment that he had carried for so long. He chose to cherish the time he had and the people around him, especially my mom. My dad wasn't a religious person, and he'd be

stunned to think I'd talk about him in a sermon, but he managed to tap into a deep and persistent faith; he chose the beauty of the rose over the disappointment of the thorns.

That's what entering God's kingdom is all about. It may sound too simplistic to you, but really it isn't complicated. We like to think it should be hard and arduous but God's kingdom hangs on our perceptions of the world. We enter through the faith we hold, faith that the world as we experience it isn't all there is of us, that we're more than the sum total of our failures and disappointments, that we are worthy of God's attention no matter what our condition or what we've done or who we love. We are daughters and sons of God no matter how often the world tries to convince us otherwise. And when we persist in that faith, all we need do is reach out and touch the kingdom all around us to find the healing we need to make us whole again.

Amen