

The Practices of Jesus: Healing
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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I was getting my hair cut when the phone call came. Two phone calls, actually, and when I didn't pick up, an urgent text message that said, 'Call-soon!' So as soon as I was out of the chair and paid my stylist, I picked up the phone. My mom was calling to let me know that my sister's growing baby, for whom we had been praying, had been diagnosed that morning at her 20-week ultrasound with a chromosomal anomaly. She would likely not live to term, or for only a short time beyond delivery. This diagnosis came a year after another of my sister's pregnancies had ended with the loss of twins.

God and I had a conversation through tears on the drive home. Actually, God did a lot of patient listening and I did some-shall we say-loud talking in the general direction of the windshield. I remember saying to God, "My sister trusts you. You could change this if you want to. Do you want to?" For three more months of pregnancy we prayed for glimpses of God's hand, for His will to be done, for faith to be upheld, for my sister and her family to be able to see the goodness of God in the midst of a valley. Although we believed Jesus can-and does-heal miraculously even today, I did not sense that He was asking us to pray for physical rearrangement of chromosomes and entire body systems, though I wanted little Mina to be born healthy with every fiber of my being. And at 32 weeks, my sister and brother-in-law's baby girl came into this world stillborn. We can say she was loved every day of her life, and we entrust her to the care of the God who loves her more than we do.

But the pain on this end is real. Many of you relate, if not to this loss, to another kind of suffering. A family member with a terrifying diagnosis. An accident that changed the trajectory of life much too soon. A chronic condition that makes you wonder, "Is this how life is now?" As I reflected on the fall season and leafed through beautiful Christmas cards this year, I realized that the backstory behind almost every smiling picture or note includes something broken, something wrong, someone sick, someone grieving. Everyone seems to need some kind of healing.

And it is into THIS kind of world that THIS passage of Scripture speaks to us. And we look to our Great Physician to heal US, and to teach us how to be His apprentices, His agents of healing in a world where things hurt.

On the heels of Jesus' encounter with Satan in the wilderness, He begins His public ministry: teaching, proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. It's no wonder that, that healing especially, gets people's attention. Other Jewish rabbis came teaching, but no one else heals the way Jesus does. Jesus' words about the kingdom of God come with demonstrations of that kingdom, with glimpses of that kingdom's power. And there is no need for news outlets or social media to spread the news that a miraculous healer has come to town. Word spreads from Galilee in all directions: to Syria in the northeast, to Judea and Jerusalem in the southeast, to the region across the Jordan and the Decapolis in the northwest and southwest. And people from all these places make their way to Galilee to see Jesus. "Your daughter still has that fever?" a woman says to her neighbor. "I heard Jesus is coming to town-you better make the trip to see him." "Your headaches are making everyday life impossible? They say Jesus is on his way-be sure to get there early when he comes!"

And so it begins: Jesus' grueling tour of Galilee, with an almost endless parade of people who hurt. One commentator estimates that if Jesus visited two or three Galilean towns per day, he would need three months to visit all 204 of them, if He took no time for the Sabbath. Jesus walks long dusty miles, encounters long lines of people, preaches the good news of the kingdom over and over again. And in each place, He HEALS the same kinds of human sufferings.

The word Matthew uses for healing is 'therapeuo'. In it you can hear our English word "therapy," and it means a cure. Jesus doesn't heal through medical treatment, although He certainly does heal physical pain and disease. He doesn't heal by merely "managing" chronic conditions, although He rehabilitates limbs. Nor does Jesus offer spiritual healing while ignoring the needs of the body-as if bodies in pain were somehow less important to Him than oppressed and sin-sick souls.

No, Jesus gets to the root of the problem. He heals every kind of sickness and disease. He touches neural pathways, awakens nerves and steadies limbs. He overthrows the spiritual powers that separate people from God. He cures the whole person-mind, body, and spirit. No wonder people were coming from everywhere to see him.

In this tradition we tend to emphasize the teaching and proclaiming side of Jesus' ministry. We talk a little less about Jesus ministry of miraculous healing. At its best, this emphasis can protect us against the dangerous and false thought that if only we prayed in the right way at the right time, with just enough faith, God would respond to our prayers, that He would heal in the way we want Him to.

But we don't have to try to wrangle the answers we want from God. Our healing or the healing of someone we love does not depend on our technique in asking God to intervene. Jesus heals in response to all sorts of requests, and sometimes even when He isn't asked at all. And then there's the Apostle Paul-a hero of faith who prays honestly and earnestly for his "thorn in the flesh" to be removed. And God's answer is a gracious no: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

If God answers someone like Paul with a "No, child. Not that. Look over here for what I am doing instead." We must allow mystery in why God chooses to heal some and not others, or why his healing comes in the other, backdoor ways rather than in the front door we pray for and so earnestly seek. Whatever Paul's thorn was, Jesus saw fit to let it remain while still offering Paul the cure that he needed most: HIMSELF. Jesus remains Emmanuel, God-with-Paul and God-with-us, thorns and all.

And yet, on the other hand, it remains true that in Jesus and since Jesus, the kingdom of God has come near. The healing and wholeness offered in that kingdom are glimpsed in part here and now. Many of us can point to times when we believe Jesus did heal us in a way that defies medical explanations. I'm thinking of the time when the renowned, no-nonsense doctor looks at a patient's loved ones and says, "well, we're not out of the woods, and we still have a ways to go. But I can't explain this progress in medical terms. God is answering your prayers." As Christ's people, we are sent by God to restore the brokenhearted, to bind up wounds, to seek the wholeness of others. Together we do establish kingdom outposts. We do acknowledge the name of Jesus and the power of God's Spirit against the powers of Satan, sin, and death.

We are Christ's body on earth. Through our loving attention the Spirit speaks peace. Through our hands Jesus touches places of pain. Through our eyes He demonstrates compassion. Through our presence, Jesus assures those who hurt that He sees and cares for them, even and perhaps especially when they can't see Him. Snapshots from Jesus' ministry give us some postures to consider as we seek to follow in His steps to care for those who hurt. We started this morning

with a wide-angle lens on Jesus' healing in Matthew 4. And we'll finish with a couple of zoomed-in scenes from Matthew 8 as Jesus heals individual people.

First, appropriate, welcomed touch can be part of our ministry of healing in Jesus' name. Matthew 8:2-3 "A man with leprosy^[a] came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy. Often our first impulse when another person is hurting is to reach out-literally-with a pat on the back or a hug. If in doubt about whether touch is welcome or not, it's always good to ask. When you are a friend of a person who in the initial waves of grief; a pastoral care assistant making visits to a person receiving limited human contact; a prayer servant interceding for someone; or a nursery worker serving a crying child, appropriate touch in Jesus' name truly ministers healing. The science behind this is interesting: "Even a brief touch...from someone who cares can start oxytocin"-a neurochemical that makes us feel connected and "helps build trust." It can "actually help speed the healing of physical wounds." "So when you offer a bear hug to someone in pain, or receive...a hug when *you* are in pain, you begin the healing process...." Appropriate, comforting touch makes a difference.

Second, Jesus certainly doesn't only heal up close and through touch. He also heals from a distance. Compassionate care from afar can be part of our ministry in Jesus name. Also in Matthew 8 we get the story of the faith of the Roman centurion: "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly." Jesus said to him, "Shall I come and heal him?" The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed." Amazed at the centurion's faith, Jesus heals the servant right then and there, from a distance. There are times when we can't physically be with a hurting person. In these times we reach out in other ways. We pray. We make supportive phone calls and send text messages. We write cards--as so many of you do so faithfully. We connect through care pages. In these ministries from a distance, the Spirit of Jesus comes near.

Ultimately, Jesus heals through his own wounds. Our ministries of healing recognize the woundedness of the world, our participation in it, and the hope that we have because Jesus endured the cross. Nicholas Wolterstorff describes an interaction he had with a Dutch obstetrician who taught nursing students. He says, "The question arose of how [the doctor] taught prospective nurses to deal with mothers whose babies were still-born or died shortly after birth. He said "I tell them that when you go into the room, you need two eyes. With one eye you have to check the I.V...with the other, you must cry. I tell them one eye is not enough, you need two eyes.... The nurse weeps because the mother weeps...The mother's weeping is the pained recognition that this is not how God meant things to be. Things have gone awry in God's world--which, of course, is why God has committed Himself to redeeming it. [The first eye is the eye of skilled knowledge]. It's with the second eye that the pain of the world and the hope for a new day enters your heart."

As much as Jesus's healing miracles affirm the value of healing for this life, he came to offer us something else. Something more: hope for that new day. In this world we have regular reminders of the reality of death. That's been true for millennia. None of those thousands of people Jesus miraculously healed during his earthly ministry is alive today. So our ultimate hope is for something more, something bigger. The kind of ultimate healing Jesus offers comes through his forgiveness that restores our relationship with God, won through the pain of the cross. "The punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed." Jesus' healing comes to us through his suffering. It emerges in the power of his resurrection-the

guarantee of our own fully healed, resurrected lives with him. This healing is our final cure. No other power can usurp it, no sin can warp it, no accident can damage it, and no disease can destroy it. For our God will do away with death and mourning and crying and pain, and the old order of things will have passed away.

Thanks be to God.

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