

What It Really Means to Heal

It is brought about not only by restoring the body, but also by welcoming, accepting and embracing all others into belonging.

By Cyndi Jones

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“If you had faith, you would be healed.”

The words came from a stranger who came up to me at the mall, where I was going about my business on the scooter I use for mobility. He then asked to lay hands on me and pray.

I was shocked the first time this happened. Not anymore. Such encounters occur regularly to me and other disabled people. I want to tell these would-be healers: “I have faith. *Do you* need prayers?” Instead, I say: “I’m fine. Thanks.”

I can’t remember a time when I wanted healing because of my disability. But I can quickly recall times when I wished our society was healed of its attitudes toward disability. If society were healed, people with disabilities could more easily find jobs and housing. We could go places on the subway and when we arrived, we could enter through the front door. We would be expected to participate in typical

social and work activities. We could live our own lives making good or bad choices, just like everybody else.

Little do these strangers know — I do have faith, and the wounds that they see actually bear witness to a miracle. If they only understood that my scars are reminders of prayers answered.

There's a story in the New Testament, in the Gospel of Mark, about Jairus, one of the leaders of the synagogue who came to Jesus and fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly: "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live."

When I was 2 years old I became very sick and was unable to breathe on my own. My father, like Jairus, pleaded with God to save the life of his daughter. My throat was cut open so that a machine could breathe for me. *How fragile life is, supported by nothing but thin air.*

For months an iron lung supported every breath I took, and when the electricity in the hospital failed, Dad would come to the hospital at all hours of the night to hand crank the machine keeping me alive. Dad never spoke about this. He had a humble, quiet faith, and I am the beneficiary of his pleading.

Many of the stories of healing in the New Testament actually have nothing to do with the faith of the person who is healed and everything to do with those who have a relationship with that person. It was the faith of Jairus that was enough for Jesus to heal his daughter. It was the tenacity of the boundary-breaking Canaanite mother that led Jesus to heal her daughter. It was the sheer boldness of the four friends who cut a hole in the roof to set their paralyzed friend in front of Jesus to be healed. And sometimes it was Jesus wanting to make a point that was the catalyst for healing. In all these stories and more, the person who received healing usually had no say in the matter, no agency.

In the New Testament, Jesus would often say before bringing about a physical healing, "Your sins are forgiven." The first and most important healing was invisible.

This happened to Bartimaeus, who was blind and sitting by the roadside begging. When he called out to Jesus, those around him told him to shut up and sit down, stay in your place. But Jesus called him to come near.

When he approached, Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus did not assume that Bartimaeus's lack of physical vision was the most important thing that needed to be restored.

In fact, the first healing for Bartimaeus was regaining his agency, being asked what *he* wanted and answering for himself. His dignity was restored, and then his vision.

People often pray for healing without recognizing that what needs to be healed is the community around them, including themselves. But this sacred, mystical, invisible healing can happen in our communities. It is not brought about by restoring the ability to see or walk or sing on key, but being welcoming, accepting and embracing all others into belonging.

A few years ago a member of the church congregation brought Beth, a friend with an intellectual disability, to church. Beth was new to church and was somewhat disruptive during the service. This community was accustomed to all sorts of interruptions, “free roaming” toddlers and people wandering in with urgent needs. When Beth started coming, people were drawn to her, and a small group quickly formed to accompany her. Gradually she learned the rhythms of the church and the people who loved her. The community missed her when she didn’t come. Beth had become part of the fabric of the community.

When those around you understand that you, exactly as you are, are essential to all of creation in a way that we cannot understand, that without you creation would be incomplete — that is healing.

Healing moves you through the turmoil, the regular assault on your being, to move past that which is preventing you from being all that you are meant to be, to knowing that you belong here. Your very existence is good and necessary.

The person who approached me at the mall was seeing only the person in front of him. He was not seeing the bigger picture. Although it may not be obvious, my disability is a gift to a community and a vehicle to reach out to others who are struggling. Over the years my personal understanding of disability has opened a place, a path through their struggles, for many people by providing a new perspective.

Perhaps our prayers for healing might be not for miraculous “cures” for individuals but for society at large to be more welcoming, inclusive and hospitable to everyone. Then instead of focusing on others’ visible scars, we see all people as they are, with everything that has brought them to be present with us in this moment.

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