

The Healing Ministry of Jesus and the Healing Ministry of the Church

Matthew 9:18-26

Today's passage is the story from Matthew about the healing of two daughters, daughters of Israel, daughters of God, somebody's daughters.

We modern Christians sometimes shy away from the healing miracles of Jesus and the healing ministry of the church—which is why I wanted one of our texts on the journey to Daybreak to be about healing. Part of the journey is about healing, all kinds of healing.

Brene Brown was talking to Richard Rohr about the state of the church today in her podcast. So much of the church today is about separating the sheep from the goats and casting out those who are not pure enough morally or theologically or gender-ly or politically. We feel so certain about such things. Rohr says no Christian has the right of certainty. Certainty is not one of the gifts of the Spirit!

Recently the Southern Baptist Convention cast out the largest and most influential of its churches, Saddleback Church in California, because it had ordained two women pastors on its ministry staff. I understand that there's also a

movement afoot in that evangelical world to forbid women as music and worship leaders!

Churches and denominations all over America are breaking apart, dividing the sheep from the goats. A friend of mine, James Howell, pastor of Myers Park United Methodist Church in Charlotte, has been pleading with leaders in United Methodist Church to keep the denomination together. Recently he told the story of visiting Ireland, where he found himself in a pub, side by side with a real-life shepherd. James asked him, “Why is it that when I pass a pasture, I often see sheep and goats together?” The shepherd said, “Because they do better that way.” Together. Maybe we have something to learn from God’s creaturely friends.

As Brene and Richard talked, Brene said she’d love to gather those who lead churches today and say, “Don’t forget everybody, our supreme task is healing!”

The kingdom of God and the ministry of the church is about healing.

I

Jesus means justice and peace and reconciliation and joy, but healing may be at the center of them all, healing in all of its dimensions.

If you take a gospel and some scissors and cut out all the healing miracles of Jesus, it would look like a sheet of paper after all the paper dolls were cut out.

Mostly air.

In Matthew's gospel, we have 17 individual healings and 13 descriptions of healings in groups! It was not an incidental part of Jesus' ministry. New Testament scholar Obery Hendricks writes:

Throughout his ministry, Jesus treated the people and their needs as holy by healing their bodies, their souls, their psyches.

Can we believe this for ourselves: our needs are holy to God?

II

So let's turn to the healing stories in today's text: A ruler, we think he may have been a public magistrate, came to Jesus and knelt before him. This powerful man had come to the end of his power. We reach that point too. He pled:

My daughter has just died: but come and lay your hands on her, and she will live.

The poet T.S. Eliot writes of "the purification of the motive/ In the ground of our beseeching." This man is at the *ground of the ground* of his beseeching. What cry is purer than that on behalf of our children?

We learn that she is twelve.

Do you remember when you were twelve? Or, when your children were twelve, or when your brother or sister was twelve? This tugs at our hearts.

Jesus didn't hesitate. Jewish New Testament scholar Amy Jill-Levine startled me this this point: Jesus "rose and *followed*". It is the only time in the gospels that Jesus followed! He follows for someone in need. And so we who follow him, follow him to where the hurt is.

III

On his way to the ruler's house, another healing happens. There was this woman who had been sick with a flow of blood for twelve years, as long as the twelve years the young girl had lived.

"If I but touch the fringes of his garment I will be healed", she said to herself. So, quietly she came up from behind so as not to be noticed by the crowd. As she touched his robe Jesus turned around and "saw her", the text says. Don't we all yearn to be seen, really seen? That in itself is a healing thing. "Take heart", he said to her; "your faith has made you well."

Her faith was faith as determination. She had said, who knows how many times, "I can't go on. I'll go on!"

It was faith as a form of hope, the triumph of hope over experience. How many times had she been for help? Here is faith as “risky prayer”. It is a risk to ask for help, especially with so much at stake, and to keep on asking.

Faith had already moved her into partnership with God in her healing process, faith that guided her silent steps to Jesus. There is a double agency at work, God’s and hers.

It may not be a surprise to us anymore that Jesus took time to heal these two daughters, two women. But it was in Jesus’ time. He came to those with least standing, those most overlooked, those at the margins of society. Who are those in our day? We follow Jesus to them.

Another point to underline here: Jesus made no moral demands of the woman or the girl. He never did in any of his healings! There was no fitness test. Their *need* was the only condition. And faith itself was not always present. How could the little girl lying in a state of death have had faith? We sometimes worry whether we have enough faith. Jesus said all you need is faith the size of a mustard seed to open the door to healing. Sometimes it is God who cracks open the door.

When Jesus got to the girl’s house, the funeral activities were in full swing. The professional mourners were there. And the flute players—nothing against

flute players, they were the hired musicians—and the curious. Someone quipped about a woman who wanted to be the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral. There was, as the text says, a *commotion* outside the house.

Jesus said to them: “Go away! The girl is not dead but sleeping.” They laughed at him. In the Bible, there are two kinds of laughter. The first kind is the laughter of the cruel and cynical, a kind of laughing *at*. The second kind is the laughter of the kingdom of God, where people have experienced the goodness of God. This is the laughter of joy. The crowd’s laughter was cynical, mocking. Jesus shooed them all away. He went into the house, and we see the tenderest of moments. He “took her by the hand, and the girl got up.” So simple and wonderful. Can you see it for yourself, his taking her hand and gently helping her up?

IV

Now let’s talk about the healing ministry of the church. In general the church has shied away from the healing ministry of the church. We’ve left it to the good and holy work of the physicians and therapists and nurses.

There’s the excess and sad residue of some “faith-healing” ministries that leave the unhealed in despair and self-questioning. “Did I not have enough faith?” There’s the hurt and despair of unanswered prayers, the dashed hopes as

people we've loved and prayed for have died. And anyone who tries to give you some easy answers for this is probably trying to sell you something. Faith and prayer are not magic formulas.

There is a natural and understandable reserve when it comes to talking about the healing ministry of the church. But there are ways we can explore what this might mean for our church and for us.

After I left Myers Park Baptist Church and had no church, for a year or so I went to St. Peter's Episcopal in downtown Charlotte. I found healing in the weekly worship with the Eucharist, the Table itself a place of healing. St. Peter's also had a small team who led a prayer ministry and offered individuals healing prayer in a small room off of the sanctuary after every service. I many times took advantage of that.

It is important for us to think of healing as a comprehensive thing: of the body, mind and spirit, all. A healing and a cure are not necessarily the same thing. One can be healed in the deep places of one's being but not cured of their illness, and one can be cured of an illness but not experience the healing of the deeper dimensions of their being.

In a British novel by Susan Howatch, *The Heartbreaker*, there is a healing ministry founded by a church named St. Benet's Healing Center. In their ministry

they talk about the relationship of cure and healing. A complete cure can never be guaranteed they explain, but an improvement in the quality of life is always possible. They say:

One should think of health as a journey toward a cure, a journey punctuated by healings.

And they tell people:

And anyway, one can argue that a complete cure is never possible because no one can be completely well in mind, body and spirit—it is the journey toward the cure that is so vital.

We might say that in a real way we need healing everyday and that the weekly ministry of the church can make that a part of its everyday ministry. Our weekly time of prayer where we lift up our concerns in prayer is a part of our healing ministry. What if every Board would ask as they plan, “How does this help bring healing?”

One of my favorite services through my life has been the healing service held every Tuesday at the Iona Abbey, led by the Iona community. Those who went to Iona last summer experienced it. In the service people are invited to receive healing prayer by coming to the front and kneeling in a circle, about ten at a time. Others are invited to come and lay hands on them as they receive their

healing prayers. One by one. And all are invited to say together the Iona healing prayer as each one receives the laying on of hands. You hear the words echo through the Abbey over and over again. It is a holy thing to hear the sound of the prayers. It goes like this:

Spirit of the Living God
present with us now,
enter you body, mind, and spirit
and heal you of all that harms you.

In Jesus name. Amen.

There are all kinds of ways we need healing, and everyday. And there are all kinds of things that harm us. This prayer has, through the years, touched me deeply.

So, as I end the sermon, I invite you to say the prayer with me. Think of someone who needs healing, someone in our congregation, healing of any kind. It's a most vulnerable and tender thing to pray like this together. I invite you now to do so line by line after me.

Spirit of the living God
present with us now
enter you, body, mind, and spirit,

and heal you of all that harms you.

In Jesus' name.

Amen

Amen