

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Tiffani Harris

Take Heart

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

June 11, 2023

This week, I have sought some of you out. I've been listening to you, to hear how others receive these stories of healing that we find in Scripture. For some, these passages are stark reminders of healing that hasn't happened, and they can be painful to hear. Some wonder if healings still happen today. We wonder about reports of miraculous healings coming from the church in the Southern Hemisphere – the fastest growing center of Christianity today. Others are skeptical. For some, it is hopeful and encouraging to consider that God heals. One doctor told me this passage of Jesus healing the hemorrhaging woman and raising the girl from the dead, is her favorite passage in all of Scripture.

I can relate to all of these sentiments. When I was 22, my father was diagnosed with a fast-growing brain tumor: Glioblastoma. As I was growing up, throughout all of my childhood and teen years, he worked three jobs at a time, always trying to make ends meet. I didn't get to see him very much. So, when I graduated from college, I hoped I would finally be able to spend more time with him as I moved back home, and he worked less. That never happened. A month later, he was sick.

We went through all the stages a family goes through when illness and tragedy like this hits: bargaining and pleading with God, vitamins and health foods. We had prayers for healing and deliverance; different doctors, surgery, chemo, radiation and all the while trying to trust God in the midst of all of that. My father died 9 months after his diagnosis.

There is so much to let go of and reconcile when tragedy and suffering strikes. In our dis-ease with illness and death, people can often say damaging things. I heard them from well-meaning people when my father was dying. Maybe you've heard them, too. Sometimes people equate healing or well-being with faith or sickness with sin or a lack of faith or we try to defend God as if God needs our defense.

How are we to understand illness? What are we to make of these stories of Christ's healings, 2000 years later, in a different time/era? All four Gospels have these stories. They are an important part of the Christian understanding of who Christ is - who God is – the Great Physician.

Matthew shortens one of these stories for us and gives us the essentials. Jesus has been in Capernaum, calling disciples and healing. Word got out and many people brought their loved ones to be healed, great crowds surrounded Jesus and he got into a boat and moved on to another place. We don't know how many he left untouched and unhealed. We catch up with Jesus as he encounters Matthew the despised tax collector, and bids him follow. Filled with energy about his new direction in life, Matthew throws a party with his tax collector friends and

fellow riffraff. The Pharisees see all this and are puzzled about Jesus being with sinners. They are concerned about holy living, and it doesn't make sense to them. Jesus, also concerned about holiness, brings the tax collectors, and sinners, those on the margins, into table fellowship.

Knowing the Pharisees' concerns, Jesus responds to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician. In case you think that I didn't come for you. Go, and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'" I imagine they scratched their heads at that one, and sometimes, we still do, right?

Here's the thing: Jesus wants them to understand that they, too, are spiritually unwell. It is so easy to ignore our spiritual poverty. Jesus redefines holiness for them. Holiness must begin with the recognition of our spiritual needs. They, too, need the reconciling love and mercy of God.

As if this cannot get any juicier, the funeral music has already begun, and a synagogue leader kneels before Jesus. He is a desperate and grieving father, and he begs Jesus for relief for his daughter. He asks for an outrageous miracle. "*Lay your hand on her and she will come back to life,*" he asks. Jesus' first raising of the dead miracle is not of someone powerful, but a little girl, an obscure child in a town of many adults. Yes, God's mercy is for all, especially those who are overlooked.

Interrupting this amazing scene, a woman quietly seeks Christ's help. She has lived with a long and debilitating chronic illness, that has made her unclean. It required her to be in quarantine for 12 years. 12 years without community or touch. 12 years of doctors, remedies, and prayer. She too, is desperate. The simple touch of Christ's robe, and she is healed. Jesus responds, "*take heart, daughter,*" be encouraged, you are part of the family of God.

One here is at the top of the social ladder, and another at the bottom in quarantine. One is with a dire need and another with a chronic illness. Both are desperate, and that is enough faith, for God can work with desperation. Jesus calls, sits with outsiders, touches, heals, and relieves the desperate. Giving us a picture of God's divine kingdom – one that restores community. It restores all people and brings them in. When Jesus is in charge, there is no suffering, no death, and no alienation.

It is a kingdom that is unfolding before our eyes, but it is not fully realized. God's kingdom is inbreaking, and yet, we yearn for all to be made right.

So we know that Christ didn't heal everyone. We don't get to hear their voices, but we know them. You know them; I know them. Hebrews 11 reminds us that not all of God's people who live holy and devout lives are healed or are spared persecution or poverty or imprisonment or violence. Together, we live in this tension.

There are 3 things that I offer today about healing as we live in the tension of God's already and not-yet kingdom:

First, it is kind of obvious, but sometimes we try to ignore this. Eventually, death and sometimes illness and suffering come for all of us. It is part of being human, as much as we try, we cannot avoid it. Only in eternity, when God's kingdom is fully realized, will every tear be wiped away from our eyes.

Second, Miracles and healings *do* still happen. They often look different than we expect. Sometimes we may not recognize God's mercy around us. The word healing comes from the old English, meaning *to restore to sound health, to be whole*. I visited with a doctor this week, to understand how she hears passages about Christ's healings. Through her experience, she learned, there is a difference between being cured of an illness and being healed.

One might be cured of cancer but bear the scars and long-term effects linger. Another might not be cured of their illness, but through the illness found wholeness as they are brought into community in ways that are restorative and redemptive. Medical miracles do sometimes happen, and often, she prays fervently for a patient who desperately needs a miracle and never gets it. From my vantage point as a minister, I have the privilege of seeing lives transformed, relationships renewed, and outsiders brought in. I see Christ redeeming brokenness over and over again and bringing life and newness and wholeness out of tragedy. I do see people being restored to health and made whole. Thanks be to God for that.

The third thing I might offer is that God uses people to heal. Christ no longer walks this earth in a physical body, but he has your body and mine. For the church is the body of Christ. We together are the hands of Christ in this place. Through the church, God's kingdom is breaking in right here.

Jesus replied: "Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Mercy means compassion, steadfast love. Our Catholic brothers and sisters have done a lot of work in the area of mercy. Pope Francis describes mercy as "daring to give your heart to the poor, to those who are in need and to those who suffer, just as Christ opened wide his heart to the misery of mankind." This is holy living. This is the holy living that Jesus was talking about. When we extend mercy, when we open our hearts to those suffering, when we facilitate restorative community, we are God's instruments of healing and wholeness.

Mercy can look like companionship with someone struggling with mental illness or opening your home in encouragement to the brokenhearted or a friend sitting with you during chemo. For me, one way I saw God's mercy during my father's illness was, strangely enough, with all the hams that the church women brought to my mother's house. They were visible reminders of the church- the arms of God. We had so many meals and so many hams. Brent couldn't eat ham for 5 years after that. So, every time I fix a ham, I smile and remember all those who prayed and walked with us as my father died.

I think the most important two words of this entire encounter can be found in verse 19: **Jesus followed**. Jesus followed the grieving father into his dark valley, right to his daughter's funeral. Jesus follows us, too, when we walk into our dark valley, Christ is there.

As Brett reminded us last week, Matthew begins this Gospel with the annunciation that Jesus is to be called “Emmanuel, God with us.” And then he ends the book with the Great Commission and Christ saying, “Behold, I am with you always.” Jesus follows.

Take heart, brothers and sisters, and know that Christ follows. May God help us to catch glimpses of Christ’s sustaining and merciful presence with us. Amen.

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