

Proper 8B – Healings: In Mark’s Gospel – and Today

Mark 5:21–43

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Today’s reading from Mark’s Gospel tells us about two of Jesus’ healings – the physical healings of two very different individuals. The differences between them are one of the most important aspects, in fact, of their stories – perhaps more important than the healings themselves – for they tell us that, regardless of his particular place in society, Jesus intended – and succeeded – in transcending particulars. He was, and is, for everyone. So who are these individuals whom Jesus healed?

One of them is the daughter of Jairus, the leader of a synagogue, a man who is therefore an important member of the Jewish community. We aren’t talking here about a rabbi, but about the lay leader, sort of like our Senior Warden, except that Jairus’s position was even more prestigious. He would have been an important man indeed. For him to abase himself at the feet of this wandering miracle worker certainly made clear just how desperate he was to save his daughter. And, though we know from many other stories in the Gospels just how much antipathy there was between Jesus and the Jewish establishment, here we have Jesus ready to help one of them – one who truly needs him.

At the other end of the social scale, however, we have a woman who has had a, presumably, menstrual blood flow for 12 years. Now such a condition is not in Mark’s time a simple one, necessitating a bit of surgery to patch the woman up so that she can once again go about her business. In fact, since blood itself is of extraordinary importance in the Jewish religion as the outward symbol of life itself, and since here there are also sex-related overtones, this twelve-year flow is no mere medical problem. Her condition renders the poor woman ritually unclean, so unclean in fact that she is not only forbidden to enter the temple but even to be part of society itself. So for her to reach out to Jesus, whom she should not even be near, in order to touch the hem of his garment, is extraordinarily brave. And when he senses that someone **has** touched his cloak, for her to admit that it was she is surely even braver. Like Jairus, here is clearly another desperate human being, one, however, at the opposite end of the social scale.

And that, I think, is the most significant message contained in this morning’s Gospel. Jesus is not just for the rich and powerful; he’s not just

for those who are well-behaved and diligent in fulfilling their religious duties; nor is he, as we often hear today, only for outcasts and those at the margins of society. His compassion extends to all who have need and who reach out to him in simple faith and trust.

However, for me, these healing stories also invoke a question that has been for years at the core of my Christianity. Now that Jesus is no longer with us physically, but instead has become the Risen Lord, will he heal everyone who calls on him today? Much depends on what we mean by the word "healing." Both the Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church have healing rites, with anointing and prayer. I belong to the Order of St. Luke the Physician. We believe that prayer can aid in physical and emotional healing. Unlike Christian Science, however, the order teaches that God also works through physicians.

Some Churches, which are less-dogmatic descendants of Christian Science, like Unity and the Church of Religious Science, permit members to visit doctors but train practitioners, like those of the Christian Scientists, and teach that, when you pray in a way that is what they would describe as scientific, designed to tap into the divine power available to all of us, you are bound to reap the benefit you seek.

There are also those Churches that are more evangelical in nature that have spawned well-publicized healers like Oral Roberts and Kathryn Kuhlman. Although both of these individuals had massive followings, but also had many detractors, it seems pretty clear that at least some of their claimed healings were genuine. While I was on the staff of the University of California, San Diego, in the early '70s, I had a friend who was an accountant at the school. He was from Ohio originally, where he had been raised in the Foursquare Church, which was created in 1922 by Aimee Semple McPherson, surely one of the most colorful of all of America's rich history of religious characters. This Church, evangelical and Pentecostal in nature, teaches spiritual healing. My friend became a young pastor in one of their congregations, and began to conduct healing services. Despite his training, it was much to his surprise that some people did indeed respond to his prayer. He was frightened by a sense of responsibility for those who were healed, but also overcome with anxiety since not everyone was – at which point he decided that accounting was a far more appropriate career path.

So it is clear that prayer can bring about physical healing, but we also have to admit that not everyone is physically healed. We can ask for it, but it is God's decision whether to heal. And how. Any teachings that

suggest that if you pray in a particular way God has to respond favorably have the unfortunate implication that humans are in charge, not God.

The stories of two people I have known can give us some guidance in the question of whether Jesus does heal today. Marty was one of those folks who are truly salt of the earth. Not a rich, sophisticated Silicon Valley sort, he was, nonetheless, a hard-working, computer-savvy techie, who was, with his wife Margaret, a member of a church I once served. He was, moreover, the sort of guy who could always be counted on not only to do his job well, but also to volunteer for anything the church might need done. A good guy, the kind, frankly, that every church needs. And both he and his wife cared deeply about others. So when one of the lay members of our church and I put together a chapter of the Order of St. Luke, he and Margaret were quick to say that they wanted to be part of the group. They were faithful participants in the weekly study group the dozen members of our chapter attended in order to become full members of the Order, and then, about a third of the way through – it takes about six months—we were shocked to hear from Marty that he had just been diagnosed as having a cancerous tumor that pressed up against his liver. Yet he continued faithfully to attend our meetings, and, while we were completing the course, we began to pray in earnest for him – a powerful experience for us all. Despite his condition Marty and Margaret regularly staffed healing stations after the regular Sunday services had ended so that they could pray for the healing of those in the congregation who requested prayer. Marty also came every Wednesday morning to a healing Eucharist service and we continued to pray for him there. You want to hear that Marty's cancer disappeared. I certainly wanted to hear that his cancer disappeared. Alas, I can't tell you that it did, since he died just a year or so later. So, we may well ask, what good was all that prayer?

First let me also tell you about Mary, another member of our group. She had had a massive stroke just a few years before, which left her in a coma for a couple of months. She, too, had had a profusion of prayers uttered on her behalf during that period. As she tells her own story, she had the sensation while she was in the coma of being on Heaven's porch, looking in at it through a window, but she didn't enter, though she really wanted to, because she was told that she had more to do back here. And back she came. Not, I must admit, without continuing problems caused by the stroke, but back – and productive, also regularly praying for others and staffing the healing stations.

I suppose one could argue that prayers helped one, but not the other. But it was clear to those of us who were close to them that prayer continued

to be an important part of the experience of both Marty and Mary. Furthermore, from their prayer lives, both contributed enormously to the lives of others around them, not the least of which were their fellow participants in the Order of St. Luke. No, Marty didn't live another twenty years, but through his ever-deepening prayer life and the sense of meaning and purposefulness in his own life in those last couple of years he'll have a positive affect on many, many people for a lot more years than those that he lost.

The value of our lives is ultimately what we do with them, not how long we are able to hang on to them. So let's not be discouraged if we don't see physical miracles when we pray for someone. Prayer is a way for us to come into God's presence. I believe that intercessory prayer helps to bring others with us. Healing is not always physical. The Greek word *sozo*, which is used in today's passage for "healing," also means "save." Even in English one can see the obvious similarity between the words "salve" and "salvation." As humans we all have that which calls out for healing in our lives. And today's Gospel tells us that, whoever we are, Jesus, our Healer and our Savior, will be there for all who reach out to him in simple faith.

AMEN