

How Does Jesus Heal?

Epiphany V

Isaiah 40:21-31 and Mark 1:29-39

February 7, 2021

Rev. Dr. Amy P. McCullough

During a burst of cleaning after Christmas I stumbled upon the journals I kept nearly twenty-five years ago. It was fascinating to thumb through the pages, getting reacquainted with my young adult self, to remember how beautiful that first apartment was to newly independent eyes, or how tender the worries were about how my life would unfold. Reading back upon my life also revealed parts of myself that have persisted. There were things I imagined would be perfected by my fifth decade that are still with me, be it my struggle to balance work and home life or my tendency toward impatience. Just like the child's realization that the parent is not perfect, the younger self thinks everything in life will smooth out in time. The passing decades, though, reveal life's persistent incompleteness.

All of these musings led me to ponder Jesus the healer. The gospels are clear that one of the primary things Jesus does is heal. The capacity to heal is central to the identity of the Son of God. Jesus uses his power to make the lame walk, the blind see, and the leprous skin smooth. His followers from then until now have looked to Jesus to heal them. Separated by centuries from these gospel's stories, which offer only cryptic scenes from a distinctly different culture than our own, we might well ask "how is it that Jesus heals?"

Goodness knows, we are in need of healing. 450,000 dead, funerals conducted only at gravesides, lives forever altered. Intergenerational trauma seen upon the streets. Inequities in vaccine rollouts and in education. Political rancor that drives families into separate corners of mutual distrust. An exploited, diseased earth. Human creatures lonely, separated from nature's healing potential. Amid all of this, each one of us, if asked and given the safe space to fully answer, could name something we would bring before Jesus, lay at his feet, and ask for his healing.

Immediately after casting out a demon from a man with him in the synagogue. Jesus goes with his disciples to the home of Simon Peter and Andrew. Jesus has already displayed his authority to subdue the forces that oppose God and burden people. Now he enters a household drama. Peter's mother-in-law is ill, bedridden with a fever. Those who tended to her would have had no way of knowing the source of her infection – no swab up the nose or waiting for test results. They had just the guesswork that accompanies monitoring symptoms. The fever is enough, though, for her to take to her bed, deprived energy and isolated from others. Her family is concerned enough to tell Jesus of her condition, trusting that he who radiates authority is capable of tending to her, also.

Jesus's actions are simple. He comes to her bedside. He takes her hand. Holding it, he lifts her into an upright position. The fever leaves her. The healing happens in two verses. Two verses!

Forty words describe the moment from beginning to end. If only every healing could be so straightforward.

Now Mark is the shortest of the four gospels. His good news does not contain infancy stories, long sections of teaching or even short glimpses into Jesus' interior thoughts. Mark moves quickly, scene to scene, wanting to draw us into the earth-shattering, world-changing energy of the Son of God. Because his brisk style, we should expect a short healing scene. Rather than equating brevity with simplicity, we can explore his depiction as a microcosm of how healing happens in the gospels. Each word offers clues into how Jesus the healer acts.

The first thing to notice is touch. Jesus approaches the feverish woman and takes her hand. He touches her. Touch accompanies virtually every healing story. Jesus puts his hands upon eyes or skin. He lets the woman hemorrhaging grab his cloak. Touch is an ingredient of his healing.

Recently I read an article about the pandemic's impact on what the author called "social, or secondary touch," those gestures like a high-five, a pat on the back, or the handshake at coffee hour. These quick touches have disappeared during the pandemic but have not received the same attention in their absence as more prominent, intimate gestures. It seems these minor instances of touch are important conduits of connection. They too cause the release of chemicals in the brain. They too are vehicles for health. We are suffering from an overwhelming absence of touch.

Now touch can also serve as a symbol for seeing someone in their particularity, taking the time to grasp someone's personhood. When Jesus touches the one seeking healing, he invites a connection, by opening an avenue between the healer and the one needing healing. While the pandemic has forced us into virtual high fives or bumping elbows instead of clasping hands, the capacity to nurture real relationship with each other has not disappeared. Healing happens in knowing and being known.

Holding her hand, Jesus helps the woman rise. His strength pulls her upright. The text says Jesus raises the woman, using the same verb that will appear to describe Jesus's rising from the dead. In Mark, where every word has meaning, this link between healing and resurrection is not an accident. Mark is making a confession: the same power of God to bring life from death is operating when Jesus heals. She moves from lying down to standing up, from caught in a fever to freely able to move, from helpless in bed to serving others. Jesus heals by offering us access to this resurrection power.

Whenever I ponder the healing urgently needed right now, I get caught thinking about what can't happen. Those who have been lost in the past year cannot be brought back from the dead. The consequences of past sins -individual or collective – cannot be undone. What is healing if wrongs cannot be corrected; harsh words cannot be unspoken, and past mistakes cannot be erased? But then the force of resurrection reasserts itself. Jesus emerged from the tomb with his wounds still visible but transformed, the freshness of Easter morning was the promise that new life is always held out to us, ours to claim.

Simon Peter's mother-in-law rises to take up the tasks of serving a meal. Some persons, hearing the story's conclusion, react with indignation. The woman has just been sick. She's barely recovered. Why is she immediately serving others? Surely this detail demonstrates the gender hierarchy operating in the world. Others attempt to wrestle good news from this imbalance by focusing upon her service. After all Jesus invites us into healed lives in part so that we can bless others. This woman exemplifying such a dynamic. Here may be the first person to serve Jesus, a model disciple.

But rather than getting too caught up in putting 21st century expectations on a 1st century world or trying too hard to redeem a discomforting detail, it makes sense to read the scene exactly as it is portrayed. A woman, whom we can operate within a household, is healed of her fever and returns to her daily tasks. She re-enters the activity of her household; into a role that provides structure, identity and purpose to her life. Sickness often isolates us from others. Sickness can rob us of the responsibilities that confer dignity, that sense of being needed or contributing to life that makes life worthwhile. When Jesus heals someone, they move from exclusion into society, from isolation back into community, from being cut off from one's role into being entrusted with a place in God's larger life.

The hardest piece of suffering is often the loss of meaning. Why did this happen? What is my role now that I feel diminished from who I could be? How do I find purpose to my days? Jesus heals by answering these questions. He says you are not meant to be alone, because I am beside you are not alone. He says in my presence you have access to the power beyond the grave, the power of resurrected life that is an entirely new way of living, that is grace-filled. It is not always going to make sense but it is always pouring forth to us from God. He offers us a role to play, a way to gift the world with your service. The purpose of our actions may not be obviously evident immediately, but they will weave together in God's mysterious life, redeemed by the great healer of us all.

How does Jesus heal? He heals by touch, by raising us up, by returning to community and gifting us with a role to play. How is Jesus reaching out to heal you?