

Health, Healing, and Liberation  
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Luke 13: 10-17

I remember the first time I ever went on a pastoral visit. During my intern year in Washington DC, the senior pastor Chuck, took me to a nursing home to visit several of our parishioners there. Before going in Chuck informed me that most of the people we were visiting that day, probably wouldn't be awake, may or may not know who he was, certainly wouldn't know why I was with him. I remember being more than slightly uneasy as Chuck quietly sat at the bedside of one woman, in her late nineties as I recall, took her hand in his, introduced himself, and then began reading from the scriptures. First psalm 23, King James Version, and then selected verses from Romans 8, the "who shall separate us from the love of God" passage. He then offered a short prayer, out loud, but not so loud I could hear it. It was clear he was making no effort to make sure I could hear what he was saying. Most of it, in fact, I couldn't hear from my chosen spot a few feet back, but I remember hearing him pray that this woman would know healing and peace, and that she would know God's presence with her. He concluded with the Lord's Prayer and then we moved on to the next room where he followed nearly the same ritual again.

When we got to the car, I asked Chuck a bunch of questions, one of which was whether or not he really believed God would heal them, or was he just saying that, in case they could hear what he was saying. Chuck looked at me and then looked away and said something like "I've been doing this for a long time. I've seen healthy people die suddenly and I've seen sick people get well. I've been with more people with cancer, than I can even remember. I guess I would

say, you never know what is going to happen with someone's health, including your own but it never hurts to ask for something you want in prayer, and all of us, no matter who we are, could use healing, peace, and the knowledge of God's presence with us. While I didn't know it at the time, I believe now that Chuck was making a distinction between being cured and being healed, where cure and health are under the purview of medicine, but wellness and healing are much broader, more spiritual endeavors. And it isn't that the two realms aren't interconnected, but they aren't exactly the same either.

Today's Gospel reading tells the story of a woman who is healed after 18 long years. Like many of the women in Bible, this woman doesn't have a name, at least not one that is known to us. Historians tell us that in ancient Israel, people with deformities, or certain illnesses were mostly cut off and isolated, that not being normal was seen as a punishment and that there were purity and cleanliness laws that forbid many folks from being touched. Developmental psychologists tell us that being touched is critical to our development, and that being touched is perhaps even on par with adequate food and drink for a young infant to reach it's fullest development.

We don't know that the woman in today's story was cut off and made an outcast in her community. We don't know that folks looked away when they saw her, or stared as she walked by, we don't know that she was called names or made fun of during her 18 years of being bent over, but it isn't that hard to imagine. And if she endured *any* if not *all* of these cruelties, how much joy, how much relief, how much healing much she have experienced when Jesus saw her, when he looked at her and then when he called her over and said "woman, you are set free from your ailment?" How great must that moment have been for her to feel Jesus hand upon her and then to be able to stand up?

One scholar notes that of the some 3700 verses in the gospels, more than 700 deal with healing or with miracles related to healing.<sup>1</sup> Nearly one-fifth of all the passages in the gospels have something to do with healing. Seems like maybe healing is something we ought to pay a bit more attention to. But what I love about this story is not just that it is about healing, and not that it is another example of Jesus taking someone on the margins of society and making them the center of his ministry, but that according to Luke, Jesus specifically links healing with freedom, with liberation. “Woman you are set free of your ailment” he says, and then later “Ought naught this woman, this daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for 18 long years, be set free from this bondage?” Isn’t she worth as much work, even on the Sabbath, as you would put toward your ox or your donkey? Shouldn’t she too, know what it is like to stand up straight and be looked at, be noticed for who she is—a daughter of Abraham, that is a beloved child of God. I’m convinced that had the woman not been made to stand straight, that is, had she not been cured, she’d still have known no small measure of healing that day.

There are many in this congregation today, many in our families and in our communities who are suffering from ailments. Some of them visible, but many of them not—folks with dealing with depression and bi-polar disorder, folks with cancer diagnosis where the outlook is good and folks with cancer diagnosis where the outlook is not, folks living with MS, people with bad backs, and bad knees and arthritis, people with headaches and heart aches, and job insecurity, or job loss, or low self esteem, and any and all of these can make it tough to get out of bed in the morning, never mind coming to church and praising God.

I really believe that because Jesus took his place up on the cross, we can be certain that God knows something about our pain, about our ache. I’m not going to stand up in this pulpit and tell you that God is going to cure you of whatever ails you, but I will tell you that I really

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in *New Proclamation Year C, 2001*, Marshall D. Johnson ed. (Augsburg Fortress, 2001) page 175.

believe in the healing power of God's love. When we think of our health and wellness, we tend to think that either we are sick, or we are well, we either have a diagnosable disorder, or we don't, but in our heart of hearts we know it doesn't exactly work that way. I've seen plenty of people that by the standards of medicine are healthy, people who have no known, no diagnosable disorder or disease, but who aren't well, people who need healing. I've also seen plenty of so-called "sick people" who are so full of love, so full of life, that despite what ails them, that despite the fact that they are incurable and untreatable in terms of medicine, they wake up every morning (ok, maybe not every morning, but most mornings) knowing that another day is a gift from God. And it isn't that they don't angry, or don't get frustrated, or don't ask why me, but overall they have a sense of peace about their situation. I don't know how it happens, but I've seen it.

I'm so thankful for all the doctors, and surgeons, and nurses, and therapists, and pharmacists, and specialists and researchers and all the people who make our medicine so good and who make living with all kinds of illnesses and diseases, bearable and better. I'm thankful for treatments and procedures and medicines, vaccines and cures. And I'm also thankful for the healing which God alone offer, and I don't even begin to understand how it works, but I know that there is a healing and peace that comes from God, that comes from knowing God's presence, from knowing and believing that we are sons and daughters of Abraham, inheritors of a promise and bearers of a covenant. There are ailments that medicine can treat and cure, and ailments that God can heal. There is a freedom that comes from being seen—seen just as we are, a liberation that comes from being called over, and a healing that comes letting God touch us. May we too, be set free, stand up straight, and be released from all that keeps us bent over.