

SERMON: “On being made well by faith”

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There are two segments or scenes—in “biblical study” talk, they are called “pericopes”—[so, two pericopes] in today’s Gospel reading: the calling “to be a disciple” of a toll booth collector (in this Gospel account named Matthew but elsewhere named Levi), and a two-layered miracle story with a hemorrhaging woman healed and a deceased child resurrected. We shall look at a central point from each of the two.

The first scene has Matthew (*not* likely the Gospel writer, by the way) decidedly following Jesus by the end of the first verse of the passage, and then comes a longer story of a house party. Parenthetically, “Whose house it is?” is unclear. Many commentators assume it is Matthew’s, but there is also the possibility (which I ascribe to) that “the house” is Simon Peter’s home in Capernaum, continuing to function as the base for Jesus while he ministers there. In which case, recognize with me that significant financial backing is implied so as to hold such a dinner party for “many tax collectors and sinners” (provision elsewhere identified as coming from devoted female patrons). [But let us turn back to the story itself ...]

Always remember that in this Mediterranean culture, there was no such thing as a private social exchange – all events get publicly witnessed and scrutinized. So, the town Pharisees are aware of what’s happening and they “chime in”, complaining about the honour-system infraction here, for a rabbi (a teacher) is at table with unclean ones (“tax collectors and sinners”).

Jesus’ reply is twofold. First, a metaphor by which he reframes the state of the tax collectors and sinners as *sickness* that needs remedy (instead of failings that beg scorn, separation and chastisement), and himself the physician who—by that calling—clearly belongs right where he is. Second, in the role of ‘teacher’/rabbi which the Pharisees themselves had acknowledged(!), Jesus assigns homework to them from scripture. He tells them, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” Within honour/shame score-keeping, to have rebutted the supposed take-down (by the Pharisees) by quoting scripture is to have won the honour challenge. But the take-down Jesus has enacted, here, is totally game-changing, because the sacrificial system stands at the centre of Judaeen religious life. The amount of time, resource and energy poured into it, in the effort to maintain right relationship with God, was significant (to say the least!). Jesus here joins a handful of the more fully evolved prophets before him as he quotes Hosea to declare the system itself **is wrongly tuned**. The Judean religious enterprise is in error(!), including (in the immediate instance) its identification of clean vs. defiled, deserving vs. undeserving, *and* its ‘using and abusing’ of the people thereby sidelined and discounted. In its place, blossoming from a true ‘religious centre’ outwards, is to be “mercy”: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” ... so, forgiveness; love; acceptance; communion and community. Jesus pins himself to this makeover; penultimately, he is pinned to the cross for it; ultimately, God lifts up Jesus and his Way-of-mercy as victorious.

The second pericope (and also those following it) reveal Jesus ‘living out’ the “**desire for mercy**” he has called for: The two miracles in today’s reading are followed by more: Jesus next heals two blind men, then a mute man, and thereafter the Gospel writer notes, “... Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness.”

What is particularly *emphasized* by this Gospel writer across all these events is heard by listening to his *different* telling of the stories ... which is to say, different from Mark and Luke. The woman with the flow of blood touches one of the tassels that—like all Judaeen men—Jesus wears, as put forward in the books of Numbers (15:37-41) and Deuteronomy (22:12). It is interesting to note that the **folk-lore** thinking about these

tassels was that they guarded the wearer against people cursing them with “the evil eye”. The hemorrhaging woman’s thought process may have been **at this level**, thinking that her condition was on account of being cursed, then surmising-and-hoping the saving *mojo* of a truly holy man’s fringe may be all she needed to be well. In any case, Jesus is aware of the touch, the little tug. Did you notice it is not, as Mark and Luke report, that Jesus is aware of power going out (being drained) from his body. In Matthew’s telling, healing is not about zapping people so that, presto bango, by expenditure of the healer’s power, they are better. What Jesus says here is what he means: “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.”

Similarly, in Matthew’s telling, there is a *different* story of this distraught synagogue leader and his daughter. Mark’s and Luke’s version has the girl very ill but alive when her dad comes to Jesus; Matthew’s version has her dead. Which elevates *onto a whole other plain* the **faith** of this man, as he implores, “come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.”

In the following pericope, with the two blind men who make their way to Jesus, Jesus asks, “**Do you have faith** that I can do this?” and “They said to him, “Yes, Lord,” whereupon he touches their eyes and says, “According to your faith, let it be done to you.”

The central point, to repeat myself, is that Jesus **means it** – he speaks the truth – when he says that it is the sufferer’s faith / belief / engagement that leads to healing, not some seemingly magic power borne and exercised by him. Jesus is pointing to the way God, the Creator, made the universe to work.

It has been many months since I last addressed healing from this pulpit; but it is a matter that is central to Jesus’ ministry; it is a matter central to my 33 years of chaplaincy and psychospiritual therapy; indeed, I believe it is central to all Christian ministry and discipleship, so I return to it “front and centre” this morning.

Let us begin this by acknowledging medical research’s finding that biology works—life is ‘put together’—such that some 20 per cent of sicknesses are self-rectifying. Which means that, on average, left totally alone, 1 in 5 sick people get better. I don’t know the current statistics for this next one, but add a placebo promise (where something innocuous is done but with strong assurance that “this is will make you well”) and a significant further fraction of people get better (on account of their mind-body *ramping up* the efficacy of their immune system, lymph system, endocrine system, nervous system, neuropeptides, and so on). There is a further level achieved by targeted medical intervention (and, unquestionably, medical science has done much – and continues to do more – that is quite amazing). Where ‘healing’ enters the picture is on yet another level, superseding all of these: When (i) the disease (the complication, the interruption, the problem, the set of symptoms) is approached—or, better, “received”—as meaningful, as feedback, as a teacher, [in religious language, as an aspect of God’s providence], and (ii) the sufferer works to receive the message—to hear it and act upon its meaning (to be changed by it)—then comes healing. The body (in fact, the whole universe!) is designed so that when feedback is heeded like this, the built-in systems *work to restore*. But, having stated this, let me also say that, whether or not there is physical restoration / cure in any given situation, healing can always happen; which is to say, the leading / teaching / correcting by the Universe [by Nature, by God] can be heeded and—accordingly—the sufferer’s life brought into closer alignment with its Design.

Cultural Anthropologists join Biblical Scholars in recognizing that Jesus acted

- in his world of honour/shame and clean/unclean,
- in that *world* obsessively focused on boundary violations,

by engaging the damage entailed (the human brokenness) and correcting it: bringing 'the ousted' not just back inside but into the very centre; making 'the least' greatest; making 'the last' first. Which—yes—heals the individual, even as it is directed at healing the whole of society. The hemorrhaging woman **reaches** for inclusion, and is healed. The synagogue ruler **reaches out** and his daughter is brought back in. The blind ones (kept from perceiving), the mute ones (kept from expressing), the possessed ones (kept from being who they are) when they **reach out** for it to happen, are all brought in with rejoicing (... into the community and Way of Jesus).

Healing is as real, and significant, and needful today as ever it was. God's universe provides significant feedback to us (as individuals, as families, as communities, as societies, indeed as the entire human race) [feedback] in our sicknesses, our dreams, our personality-patterns and relationship-patterns; and, if we heed the feedback, we move towards wholeness (or, if you prefer the more religious words, we are redeemed and we are saved).

You who know me have heard me say, before, that I learned these things personally from night-time dreams which persisted in my adolescence (eventually teaching me!) and from sicknesses that persisted in the last year of my first pastoral charge (ultimately teaching me). Within that church, as pastor, and then across my career in psychospiritual therapy and chaplaincy, I learned this truth over-and-over-again from the life stories of congregants, clients and patients. It also became clear that most people in the Western World, including practicing Christians, want cure, not healing; which is to say most people want a fix so as to get back being and doing "like before; just like always". Healing is a process of change and growth; engaging in healing means things will be different. Which requires faith. What Jesus spoke is a basic rule of the universe: "By your faith are you healed!"

In conclusion, here is my paraphrase of *words of Jesus* that we read today: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ... I have come [Jesus says] to call **not** the ones who are, or at least think they are, all together, but those aware (through the feedback God-their-Creator provides) that they are off the mark and have work to do. By their faith / engagement / determination, they are brought from 'out' to 'in with me'; they are healed / restored / redeemed ... they are saved."

Thanks be to God!

In response, please take out the insert from your Order of Service and let us sing, together, "Woman in the crowd"