

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

June 28, 2009
13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mark 5:21-43

Healing Powers

For some time now, in the listing of top public issues on the mind of Americans is the issue of health care—more specifically, access to health care for all Americans, of which nearly 50 million are now currently uninsured. Intertwined in this matter is the high cost of health care in this country. While the quality of health care available in America is the envy of the rest of the world, the unevenness in who can get access to that high quality care is where the rub lies. During last year's presidential election, each of the candidates was touting a proposal as to how to address this crisis. And of course, since the election the economic recession has only added to the problem and to the urgency for addressing it. It's an issue with which the congress is currently wrestling and we're sure to hear a lot more about it over the course of the coming months.

Good health is something that can easily be taken for granted when that's what we're experiencing. Great strides have been made in the last generation to raise awareness of the tremendous benefits that are to be achieved through healthful living. From nutrition and diet to exercise and fitness, and from preventive medicine and regular checkups to safety awareness and risk reduction, there are piles of information out there for us to take in as we seek to maintain good health. The strides that have been made in the promotion of healthful living have resulted in the steady rise in life expectancy for Americans which now exceeds 77 years.

But as we were reminded this week with the deaths of two well known entertainers, Farrah Fawcett who died of cancer at age 62, and Michael Jackson who died of cardiac arrest at age 50, life-threatening medical maladies cannot be staved off with material resources alone.

Today we encounter two stories, one of which is contained within the other, that have to do with healthcare and healing. One is about a 12 year old girl, the daughter of a prominent Jewish leader, who is gravely ill and on the verge of death. The other is about a woman who has been ill for 12 years and has expended all that she had available to her in pursuit of a cure, but to no avail. In each case, the need for healing and wholeness has exceeded all conventional resources available. And in each case Jesus is sought out for a return to health and wholeness.

What is striking about these two stories is that they span the social and economic spectrum of the time. The prominent Jewish leader named Jairus, the father of the dying girl, is by all accounts an upstanding member of the society. He is a respected religious leader who would enjoy all the benefits associated with that status. Every resource for the healing of his daughter available at that time would have been within the grasp of Jairus. In spite of that, he finds himself in a desperate quandary.

As a faithful Jewish leader who was aware of this Jesus of Nazareth and the stir he was making would have known of his Jewish leader colleagues who were calling for the stamping out of Jesus since he was threatening the status quo. But he also would have known about the many accounts of the miraculous healing that Jesus had been performing—the very kind of miraculous healing he was seeking for his daughter.

The woman in the second story is everything that Jairus isn't. Not only is she a woman, a fact that already placed her in a second-class position, she is an unclean woman. The hemorrhages that have afflicted her for a dozen years rendered her ritually unclean with respect to the Jewish law. So she is an outcast, barred from the very synagogue in which Jairus was leader. And then to top it off, she is destitute, having expended all of her financial worth seeking a cure for her illness. This woman finds herself in a desperate quandary.

As a penniless outcast declared ritually unclean, she doesn't dare come anywhere near to Jesus. She's not supposed to even be in the vicinity of the crowd that has surrounded Jesus. But she had also caught wind of the stories surrounding this Jesus who was known to be able to offer the kind of miraculous healing she was seeking.

In these cases the afflictions were no respecters of class and ranking and status. Both the girl within the well-to-do and privileged family of Jairus and the unclean outcast were at the ends of their ropes. There was nothing more that could be done. . . that is except to risk an attempt to encounter the healing Jesus. And that's exactly what each of them does.

In the case of the woman, she persists and presses into the crowds, and with a deep faith, reaches out to touch Jesus' cloak confident that in that fleeting contact she would be made well. What results is a more profound encounter with Jesus when he senses her presence and contact and confronts her at which point she falls before Jesus to tell him what had happened. What could have been a very negative interaction between Jesus and the woman turns out to be a tender moment of spiritual intimacy when Jesus affirms her for her faith, calls her "daughter," and then heals her of her disease.

As the story goes, Jesus is on his way to the house of Jairus when the hemorrhaging woman delays him. And it is while he is interacting with this woman that word comes to him that Jairus' daughter has died. But rather than canceling his plans, he sticks to his plan to go to Jairus' home. When he arrives the mourning over the girl's death has already begun at which Jesus declares that she is not dead, but only asleep, eliciting laughter from those who scoff at this outrageous suggestion. And of course Jesus is correct. For he goes into the girl's room with her mother and father and with a word, tells the girl to get up, and she does, to the amazement and astonishment of everyone there.

Both of these stories affirm and declare the compassionate and loving care that Jesus offers those in need. They illustrate the desire of Jesus that those who are sick and in need, even at the point of death, can be made whole through the power and compassion of God.

These stories also exhibit the faith of those seeking healing—faith that humbles Jairus to reach beyond what he knows, and faith that empowers the hemorrhaging woman to risk breaking the rules and conventions of her day.

While these two healing stories can inspire us even today, 2000 years later, they can also be a source of puzzlement. Like any of the miracle stories that we read about over the course of Jesus' life and ministry, our faith perspective has us cheering and glorifying God each time we encounter Jesus' miracles. But our modern, scientific and logical perspective can make for a strong counterbalance to the faith perspective, if it doesn't obliterate the

faith perspective all together. For the truth of the matter is, that each of us can identify situations where powerful prayers of masses of people offered on behalf of someone who is gravely ill have not resulted in healing from illness or affliction. And when someone dies prematurely from illness or accident we are stunned and saddened. In such instances we may hear the sentiment expressed, “Why weren’t our prayers to God for miraculous healing answered?”

Presbyterian pastor Michael Lindvall tells this story. “I have a friend, a man of deep faith, who was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease when he was still in his fifties. He and his wife prayed that he might be healed. Twenty years later, he is in the last debilitating stages of the disease. Nevertheless, he once told me that his prayers had been answered. He said in all sincerity, ‘I *have* been healed, not of Parkinson’s disease, but I have been healed of my fear of Parkinson’s disease.’” (*Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B, Volume 3. Barlett and Taylor, ed., Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 188)

Our understanding of what prayers for healing are may be too narrow. The same Presbyterian pastor notes, “That is to say, prayer is not simply a matter of bending the vector of divine will toward my will, my needs and my hopes. More profoundly, to ask something of God is to edge into deeper relationship with God. God’s mind may or may not be changed, but I—my mind and heart—may be.” (*ibid*, p. 190)

The healing power of God is broader, deeper and higher than we can comprehend or understand. The advances of modern medicine in our lifetimes would surely appear to be miraculous to those in the time of the Bible. Medical researchers and scientists have used and are using the gifts of inquiry and intelligence, both gifts from our creator God.

As Jesus made no socioeconomic or other distinction in who would benefit from his healing power, it is for us in these times of modern medicine to also make no distinction in who will benefit from all that the healthcare enterprise offers today. We will honor God when we as a nation work for the inclusion of all in benefitting from the results of God’s gifts to us.