

## Healing Stories

A few weeks ago, we read an account of Jesus returning to his hometown of Nazareth. Instead of the child most of the people remember, he is now an adult who has gained some renown throughout the region as a preacher, teacher, and healer. In the synagogue he reads the words of the prophet Isaiah and proclaims that he is the one God anointed to preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the prisoners, restore sight to the blind, and liberate the oppressed. He declares that his ministry isn't only for the faithful insiders but for the outsiders – those who weren't descendants of Israel – as well.

Last week we read from Jesus' sermon on the plain during which he continues to teach about God's extravagant love, mercy, justice, and generosity.

Along with these sermons and sayings, in his account of the ministry of Jesus, Luke includes many stories of healing. Jesus heals people with fevers, leprosy, paralysis, and numerous unnamed afflictions. He also relieves people of troubled, unclean, even demonic spirits. According to Luke 6:19, *The whole crowd wanted to touch [Jesus], because power was going out from him and he was healing everyone.*<sup>1</sup>

I read these stories with a mixture of optimism and skepticism, of faith and doubt. I identify with the writer of Psalm 103 who joyfully receives the benefits of God's grace – forgiveness, healing, rescue, salvation, love, sufficiency, renewal – while at the same time acknowledging the frailty and brevity of life that always includes sin, illness, and despair.

Singing the song, "Healer of Our Every Ill" ministers to my mind, body, and soul even as I acknowledge the science of illness and know that some ills are not cured.

These are a few of the thoughts, feelings and experiences I bring with me as I read the story of Jesus healing two daughters as told in Luke 8. Let's read this story together.<sup>2</sup>

*When Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him, for they had been waiting for him. A man named Jairus, who was a synagogue leader, came and fell at Jesus' feet. He pleaded with Jesus to come to his house because his only daughter, a twelve-year-old, was dying.*

*As Jesus moved forward, he faced smothering crowds. A woman was there who had been bleeding for twelve years. She had spent her entire livelihood on doctors, but no one could heal her. She came up behind him and touched the hem of his clothes, and at once her bleeding stopped.*<sup>3</sup>

Right away we need some context. The crowd welcomed Jesus when he returned. Where had he gone? Earlier in the chapter Luke writes, *One day Jesus and his disciples boarded a boat. He said to them, "Let's cross over to the other side of the lake."*<sup>4</sup> The majority of Jesus' ministry happens in Galilee, the northern section of Israel on the west side of the Sea of Galilee. Most of the people living there are Jews, the same ethnicity and faith tradition as Jesus. Jesus and his

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 6:19, *Common English Bible*

<sup>2</sup> Parts of the sermon are adapted from Week 11 of "Meet Jesus, the Messiah" from Shine, [Shine - Menno Media](#); and Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year B*, Trinity Press International, 1993, p. 328.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 8:40-44, *Common English Bible*

<sup>4</sup> Luke 6:22, *Common English Bible*

disciples had traveled to the eastern side of the sea, This area is primarily Gentile in population, with some Jewish inhabitants. While they are there, Jesus performs an exorcism, sending the demons into a herd of pigs which then rush down a cliff and drown in the sea. His power is effective even among these outsiders.

As soon as Jesus returns to Galilee, he's approached by an esteemed synagogue official named Jairus, whose 12-year-old daughter is sick. His concern and love for his daughter are so great that he forgets his high social standing and humbles himself, falling at Jesus' feet and begging for help.

In contrast to this direct approach, an unnamed woman finds her way through the pressing crowd, comes up behind Jesus, and touches the bottom of his clothes. The woman has been bleeding for 12 years—as long as Jairus' daughter has been alive. Her condition is probably a uterine hemorrhage – a 12-year-long menstrual flow. It seems likely that the condition is physically debilitating. Moreover, she probably would not have been married and certainly would not have been able to bear children—all in a culture where women's roles are defined by their husbands and families. Since she has fruitlessly spent all she has on seeking help from doctors, it's likely she is impoverished.

Her perpetual bleeding puts her in a state of constant ritual impurity. According to the laws in Leviticus 15:19–30, a woman is considered unclean for seven days during her period. Anyone who touches her or anything she has sat on during that time must wash their clothes, bathe in water, and will be unclean until evening. Ritual impurity bars people from community life. They are considered spiritually unworthy as well.

We've all experienced times of isolation due to illness or possible exposure during the past two years. Imagine being isolated for seven days every month from puberty until menopause. Or, in the case of this woman, for more than 4,830 days. She is truly living on the margins of society.

The fact that she approaches Jesus from behind, touches only the hem of his robe, and comes before him trembling when there is no way out suggests that such public exposure would bring shame to her. What courage and faith it took for her to risk the wrath of the jostling crowd who wouldn't be able to avoid touching her as she moved among them to find Jesus. Her faith and courage pay off. She is healed immediately!

*"Who touched me?" Jesus asked.*

*When everyone denied it, Peter said, "Master, the crowds are surrounding you and pressing in on you!"*

*But Jesus said, "Someone touched me. I know that power has gone out from me."*

*When the woman saw that she couldn't escape notice, she came trembling and fell before Jesus. In front of everyone, she explained why she had touched him and how she had been immediately healed.*

*"Daughter, your faith has healed you," Jesus said. "Go in peace."<sup>5</sup>*

Jesus is on his way to assist an esteemed synagogue official, and yet he allows himself to be interrupted by an unknown person. He knows something has happened to someone in the crowd around him.

The woman gathers her courage once again and proclaims publicly why she touched him and how she has been healed. She exposes her situation to everyone, even those who now know they've been exposed to impurity.

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 8:45-48, *Common English Bible*

The fact that the woman tells her story for all to hear allows Jesus to acknowledge her faith publicly. He offers healing and life to this nameless, marginalized woman in the crowd. He restores her to the community.

Hear again the words he says to her, *Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.* The Greek word translated as “healed” is also the word for saved. What the woman receives from Jesus is salvation in the fullest sense of the word—social, physical, emotional, and spiritual. Jesus tells her to “go in peace.” Peace is also associated with salvation and wholeness. Finally, Jesus calls her “daughter,” naming her as part of the family of God.

Let’s return to the story of the other daughter.

*While Jesus was still speaking, someone came from the synagogue leader’s house, saying to Jairus, “Your daughter has died. Don’t bother the teacher any longer.”*

*When Jesus heard this, he responded, “Don’t be afraid; just keep trusting, and she will be healed.”<sup>6</sup>*

Given what Jairus has just witnessed, I wonder what is going through his mind as they continue the walk to his home. The woman overcame fear, believed, and was saved. Was Jairus able to set fear aside and keep trusting as Jesus told him to do?

*When he came to the house, he didn’t allow anyone to enter with him except Peter, John, and James, and the child’s father and mother. They were all crying and mourning for her, but Jesus said, “Don’t cry. She isn’t dead. She’s only sleeping.”*

*They laughed at him because they knew she was dead.*

*Taking her hand, Jesus called out, “Child, get up.” Her life returned and she got up at once. He directed them to give her something to eat. Her parents were beside themselves with joy, but he ordered them to tell no one what had happened.<sup>7</sup>*

Jesus once again breaks through a barrier by touching the child. Similar to the woman’s bleeding, death isolates the family and excludes all who attend the corpse from ritual participation in the very religion to which they look for support. But Jesus takes the girl’s hand, and another daughter is healed! In both cases, by being touched and by touching, Jesus breaks through the barriers. Jesus’ power restores health and life.

As I mentioned at the beginning of these remarks, stories like these both affirm and challenge my faith. They comfort me and give me pause.

One of the dangers of hearing Jesus tell the woman that her faith has healed her and hearing him tell Jairus to just keep trusting and she will be healed is that we may begin to think of God as a vending machine. We insert prayers and healing automatically is produced.

One of the dangers of discounting all stories of healing by faith is a loss of hope in anything outside of human control.

During my weekly Zoom call with three college friends on Thursday, I talked about this sermon and the difficulty I sometimes have in knowing how to pray for healing. After a brief pause, they began talking. I quickly grabbed the envelope at the top of the pile of junk mail next to me and began scribbling their responses. This is what they said.

*Prayer opens up a space in the universe for healing to occur, but we don’t know what the healing will look like. Sometimes we ask for the wrong things. Healing isn’t always the same as curing. Death isn’t always the worst thing that can happen.*

I think of the losses our congregation has experienced over the past two years – Nancy, Susan, Lidia, Penny, Dick, Gary. We prayed and we trusted, but their physical bodies were not

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 8:49-50, *Common English Bible*

<sup>7</sup> Luke 8:50-56, *Common English Bible*

restored to life. And yet, healing did occur – rest from the struggle for them and healing for us as we share our stories about them and experience the love that lives on after death.

I also think of the many prayers we've offered for people experiencing illness and pain who were healed through a combination of the efforts of medical science, the comfort of being surrounded by prayer, and the action of God.

As we read the stories of two daughters in Luke 8, it's important for us to note that for Jesus, healing involves much more than the physical body. It involves the social, emotional, and spiritual aspects as well.

Last week I shared the story of MJ Sharp, who was murdered while doing peacemaking work in the Democratic Republic of Congo. One of his Congolese colleagues, Serge Lungele, told MJ's parents about a dramatic episode in MJ's life.<sup>8</sup>

*He and Serge found a bus parked across the road. They saw masked, armed people robbing passengers lying in the road. Serge was shaking in his seat, and MJ got out. He walked up and asked, "How can you do this to your own people who have so little?" And they walked away.*

*MJ gets back in the car, and Serge said, "Why did you do that?"*

*He said, "The worst that could happen is that we would be kidnapped. If that happens, my country will come looking for me. And if they kill us, then our blood can help to heal this land."*

On learning last week that about 50 people have been sentenced to death for MJ's murder, John Sharp, MJ's father, said, "We still don't know who ordered the hit. And we have concerns about those convicted. How will life imprisonment transform the lives of those imprisoned and their families? We wish for shalom justice, where people on all sides get what they need, not what they deserve."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps this has strayed a bit too far from the stories of healing found in Luke 8, but I think it helps us understand that healing and salvation are about much more than the physical. God's ultimate intent for each person and all of creation is a life of wholeness – living in right relationship with God and others and experiencing health in all areas of life.

Let's continue to pray for and joyfully receive the benefits of God's grace – forgiveness, healing, rescue, salvation, love, sufficiency, renewal – while at the same time acknowledging the frailty and brevity of life that always includes sin, illness, and despair.

Let's continue singing songs that minister to mind, body, and soul even as we acknowledge the science of illness and know that some ills are not cured.

Let's continue to bring our requests to God and to this congregation, knowing that God hears our prayers and that we represent the open arms of Jesus to each other.

Let's continue to open up a space in the universe for healing to occur.

May God's way of love and peace come more fully here on earth. Amen

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<sup>8</sup> [For parents, book fills gaps in an unfinished life | Anabaptist World](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Dozens sentenced for murders of U.N. investigators | Anabaptist World](#)