

THE HEALING POWER OF JESUS

Luke 8:40-55

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In every church I know of, there are two kinds of healing stories. There are the ones with happy endings, and I can think of many in the Avon Lake UCC. We have, as part of our collective memory, stories of people in our congregation who have been very ill, whom we have prayed for, and who have been restored to health. I can think of one such story right now. A man we've been praying for for months came by my office last week and said, "Kelly, one of my tumors is gone; it's just gone."

And **then** there are **other** stories of people whose names were on the prayer list for a long period of time - people for whom there was an outpouring of love and concern, and yet their diseases weren't cured. They died. I'm sure you can think of some of those stories, of people you have known and prayed for. In the previous church I served, there was a young couple whom nearly everyone knew. She was a TV news anchor; her husband was a cameraman. He was diagnosed with cancer, he underwent a bone marrow transplant, he had the best medical care, and yet he died. One of my colleagues told me recently that when he was a youth pastor in Tennessee, a popular high school football player became ill. The young man wasn't a member of the church where my friend served, but all of the youth in the church knew him. The whole town was praying for him, and when he died, the students in my friend's youth group were devastated, their faith was shaken, they were full of questions. In their mind, it wasn't just a matter of fairness - that no one so young should die - it was almost

a matter of math. Surely God wouldn't let someone die who had thousands of people praying for him.

It is this second kind of story I think about when I read the healing miracle stories in the Bible. When we read that Jesus has the power not only to cure a long-term illness but to actually restore life to someone who has died, then the next logical question becomes - "If Jesus has that power, why didn't he heal me? Or my friend? Or my spouse? Or my child?"

It's a question I've been asked hundreds of times. And hundreds of times I have recommended this classic book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People. I don't know of one that is better. It's written by a person of faith, Rabbi Harold Kushner, a person who never questioned or doubted God, until his own three-year-old son was diagnosed with a rare disease that causes a person to age rapidly. Aaron died at age 14. Kushner's book contends head-on with the questions of faith that arise when we face unfairness and tragedy. Kushner describes the book's purpose: "I wanted to write a book that could be given to people who have been hurt by life, by death, by illness or injury, by rejection or disappointment, and who know in their hearts that if there is justice in the world, they deserved better."

The people Jesus encounters in our story for today all thought they deserved better. The illness of a child is never right or fair. Jairus is a leader of the synagogue; he pleads with Jesus to come to his house, to bring his healing touch to Jairus' 12-year-old daughter who is sick to the point of dying. Here's what we notice about the healing miracles of Jesus - he doesn't plan them, he doesn't decide each day how many people he can heal. He never describes himself as a healer. But when he's asked, he's

moved with compassion. Jesus sees the pain in Jairus' eyes and begins following Jairus towards his house. But there's a crowd.

You see, Jesus has just stepped off the boat on the side of the sea of Galilee; people have been waiting for him there. They're clamoring all around. Some because they want something from him, some are just curious; others are onlookers - they've heard that there's something special about this man Jesus. So it's not easy for Jesus to follow Jairus. Did you notice what Beau read? Here's verse 42: "As Jesus moved forward, he faced smothering crowds." Think of trying to keep your family together when you leave a baseball game; all the people in one place at once. It's that kind of crowd. A swarm. And somehow, in the midst of this chaos, Jesus feels something. He stops. "Who touched me?" Jesus asks. Everyone looks around. Finally Peter says, "Uh, Jesus, everyone's touching you, dozens of people, all at once." But Jesus says, "Someone touched me; and at that moment, I felt power go out of me." (Interestingly, this time, Jesus isn't even aware that he has provided healing...it seems that healing power has just emanated out of him towards one particular person.)

A woman. She's terrified, because she's unclean, impure, she's not supposed to touch anyone or even be near anyone. She's been hemorrhaging for twelve years - that means she's not allowed into the temple. She can't worship. She can't be in community because, according to the purity laws, she would contaminate others. She thinks she deserves better. She's desperate. She believes that Jesus can heal her. And now she thinks perhaps she'll be punished for being so bold, for breaking the rules. But Jesus stops and says, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace." Not

only is she cured - her hemorrhaging has stopped - but she is healed, made whole. She can re-enter the world, be a part of the community again.

Jairus sees all of this, and so does everyone else, and what they see is that Jesus' healing power is not reserved for the religious leaders, like Jairus. It's not just for the wealthy or the well-connected; it's for everyone. It's for an outcast woman who breaks the law.

By the time Jesus arrives at Jairus' house, it's too late. The little girl has died. The professional mourners have already come, and they laugh when Jesus enters the house. But Jesus takes the little girl's hand, and says, "Child, get up," and she does.

And I imagine that on the next holy day, the woman finds herself in the synagogue sitting on the same bench with this young girl. Neither knows about the other, but there is this connection between them. They have both been touched by the healing power of Jesus. He has spoken to each of them. And now they're a part of the same community, despite the difference in their ages and life circumstances. Isn't it the case that the experience of pain is something we all have in common?

Everyone you encounter has a story, and everyone's story includes at least one chapter of pain. A disappointment, a grief, a struggle, a loss. I believe that the healing power of Jesus is not only the power to cure but the power to reconcile, to return people to community, to help us see our common humanity.

For Jesus, healing was both personal and communal.

I thought about that this week, as I read stories about the horrific killings in Atlanta, as I read the different news articles beginning to try to analyze the motives and the suspect. Regardless of what he intended, the effect of these particular crimes is

that once again in our country, one group of people feels targeted and at risk. Once again, we are aware of our brokenness, and our need for communal healing.

Personally, I was involved in some difficult conversations this week, some intense conversations that made me realize how much hurt many people are carrying. The polarization that we see evident on a global scale, the polarization that threatened to cause our capitol to collapse on January 6...that all filters down and influences the lives of people in this congregation. It affects the way we have reacted to the virus, and those differences have caused rifts in relationships. Political divisions don't stay in Washington or Columbus; they enter our workplaces, our congregation, our neighborhoods; they show up at our dinner tables.

When I talked to Church Council this week about working towards a Memorial Day date to re-open for in-person worship, I asked Church Council members how they are feeling. My hunch was that many people are beyond excited for life to return to pre-pandemic normal, but I also know that there is unexpressed grief. Most Church Council members have said to me, "We're tired of talking about the virus; we're tired of bad news...we're ready to move on." And we will! And we will also be aware of our brokenness and our need for healing.

Last weekend, Doug and I watched the movie "Nomadland"; it is almost a documentary; it's based upon real-life stories of which I was not at all aware. The film takes us into a community of current-day nomads. Most of them are older Americans with working-class or middle-class backgrounds who have had their lives turned upside down by the closing of factories and plants across the country. Others have hit the road

after the death of a loved one, the diagnosis of a life-limiting illness, a desire to see more of the country, or the determination to have some adventures before it is too late.

These nomads are also referred to as "work campers" or "migrant workers." Unable to pay their mortgages and live on their meager savings and Social Security checks, they move into RVs, trailers, or vans and travel to places for temporary work -- an Amazon fulfillment center, Wall Drug store in the Badlands of South Dakota, or the beet fields of North Dakota.

In one scene, hundreds of people arrive in Arizona, in their vans and campers. They form a community. They line up to serve themselves from giant pots of chili, and sit down in circles in their lawn chairs to eat together. They put out the possessions they don't want and swap with each other. "I'll trade you a potholder for a can opener." At night they gather around campfires and tell their life stories. The camera scans the group, and keep in mind, these are real people, not actors. You see one face after the other, you see wrinkles and worry lines; you just know that these are people for whom life has been hard. But here they relax. Here they belong.

To me, that scene looks like church - a place for people to find community. A place where people discover that, even though our stories are not the same, we all have joys and we all have sorrows. The more we trust each other, the more vulnerable we become with each other, and the deeper our bonds become. We don't have to agree on everything in order to work together and worship together, but we do have to value one another's stories. Church, at its best, is where we find healing together, and where we realize that we each have a place at the table. May it be so. Amen