

### Scripture Readings: Mark 5:22-42

<sup>22</sup>One of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet <sup>23</sup>and begged him repeatedly, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.” <sup>24</sup>So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him.

<sup>25</sup>Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. <sup>26</sup>She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. <sup>27</sup>She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, <sup>28</sup>for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” <sup>29</sup>Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. <sup>30</sup>Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” <sup>31</sup>And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” <sup>32</sup>He looked all around to see who had done it. <sup>33</sup>But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. <sup>34</sup>He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

<sup>35</sup>While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s house to say, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?” <sup>36</sup>But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.... The child is not dead but sleeping....” <sup>41</sup> And he took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!” <sup>42</sup>And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age).

### James 5:7-16

<sup>7</sup>Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.... <sup>10</sup>As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. <sup>11</sup>Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.... <sup>13</sup>Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup>Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup>The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who

has committed sins will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup>Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

## Sermon Text

The subject of healing is a very personal and touchy one, because this is not at all an abstract subject: some of us fervently need and desire healing in our own bodies, and if not in our own bodies, then in the bodies of someone we know and we love. This question of whether God still heals today, strikes at the heart of our faith because if God can do anything, if God can help, then why doesn't he? And if God can't help, then really...what good is he? When we are in the place of suffering and there is no relief from God, we tend to do one of three things: 1. we doubt that God, who fails to heal our diseases, really can do anything. 2. We doubt that God, who fails to alleviate our suffering when he is well able to do so, really loves us. 3. Or we doubt ourselves: we begin to think if only we could pray better prayers, if only we could find the right healer, if only we had more going for us, then perhaps we could strike the right bargain and get a result.

Today I want to state the faith that God *can* indeed do anything, that God indeed *does love* us more than we can possibly imagine, and also that healing has more to do with *God's will* than with any factor in us. I'm pretty sure of those three things, but to be honest, there is much else to do with this topic that I am not sure of. God's healing power in the world today is something about which I have many more questions than I have answers. So I'm going to offer you the thoughts of one Christian trying to muddle through the mystery, in dialogue with the Bible, her experience, and her theological tradition, and I pray that it might be helpful, and not hurtful, to anyone for whom this question strikes close to home.

First of all I think if anyone is wondering whether faith-healing is real, whether we should even look to God to heal us physically, to that we must answer yes. We cannot ignore the fact

that throughout the Old Testament God is presented as *Jehovah Rophi*, the God who heals. And when Jesus walks among us to show us what God is like, one of the most obvious things characterizing *his* ministry is his healing power. Jesus heals 40 individuals whose stories are told in the gospels, but the gospels allude to great crowds of people who were brought to Jesus, and whom he healed. For them, the healings were about relief, about being able to pick up their lives again where they had laid them down, but for Jesus and for the ministry, the healings had a particular purpose that went beyond relief of the individual. The healings acted as a sign of God’s kingdom, a proof that the dominion of death, decay and disintegration was being broken by the God who is on the side of Life, of health and of wholeness. In the gospels, healings are presented as signs of the glory of God and invitations to believe.

The physical healings of Jesus are often placed in the wider context of a person’s salvation. In fact, in the New Testament the word for “healing” and for “salvation” are one and the same. With those whom he heals, Jesus often addresses sin and speaks about faith. Some, like the paralysed man let down through roof receive a total healing: restoration for his body (Mark 2.12) and absolution for his soul (Mark 2.5). Others, like the man by the pool of Bethesda, are physically healed but continue in their sin and have to be warned: “stop sinning, or something worse may happen to you.” (John 5.14). Today’s reading about the woman who touches Jesus’ cloak and is healed of her hemorrhages is only one of those stories in the gospels where Jesus says: “your faith has made you well” (Mark 5.34). Jesus clearly wants to place physical healing in the context of a more complete well-being, which includes first and foremost, our faith-relationship with God.

As healing had a prominent place in the ministry of Jesus, we find that it also had a prominent place in the ministry of the apostles. In I Corinthians 12, healing is named as one of the gifts of the Spirit, which is given for the building up of the church. As the first century progresses, and the foundations of the church take

shape, there is evidence that physical healings become less common. And some of those whom we might expect to be healed, God chooses not to relieve. Paul, for example, has an unspecified physical affliction, which he calls his “thorn in the flesh.” In 2 Corinthians 12, he writes of how he has prayed to God to remove that affliction and three times has received the answer: “my grace is sufficient for you, my power is perfected in weakness.” The problem with healers is that they tend to become over-confident. Paul uses the word “conceited.” Like motivational speakers or sellers of new age remedies, they appear themselves the picture of health and success and offer (usually for a price!) the secret of their success to others. That way, (Luther called it “the way of glory”), was certainly open to God and to Christ, but instead they chose the way of weakness, “the way of the cross.” Christ chose to be a wounded healer -- one who could heal others but who would not save himself. And the path he chose for his church was similar – the way of patience, the way of prayer, the way of faith, tried and tested in the fire.

Even in the gospels, where it is nothing for the disciples to cast out six demons, to heal a dozen people and to raise a few dead folk, all before breakfast, there is that story of the boy with the demon, which the disciples cannot expel. Jesus, after he expels it, explains the reason: “this kind can come out only by prayer” (Mark 9.29). As time goes on in the New Testament era, *prayer* for healing is more commended to the people of God than recourse to those noted for the *gift* of healing or of miracle working. James speaks of being patient, like the prophets, like the sufferer, Job, and in that context says: “<sup>14</sup>Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup>The prayer of faith will save the sick” (James 5: 14-15).

Charismatic healing – healing by miracle – is different than healing by prayer, though it is the same supernatural power, the power of God, at work in both. The one is immediate and dramatic and usually involves an agent who is recognised as “having the

gift”. The other, though no less dramatic, works by the leverage of many regular Christians, praying regularly. I believe that both types of healing happen in the church today, but that genuine examples of healing by miracle are very rare. Examples of healing by prayer are less rare, and even where God’s will is not to grant physical healing, this side of resurrection, such prayer always receives an answer. That things are arranged in this way is not a sign of God’s weakness, but of God’s wisdom. When God does not heal us as we might wish, it is not a sign of God’s unloving abandonment, but rather an invitation for us to journey with him -- to certain victory, but perhaps by going through and not around the experience of the cross and even of the grave.

When I was studying at Regent College I knew a girl called Andrea. She had done missionary work in the Philippines. At a bible study one night we were talking about miracles of healing and she said that she could never doubt them, because of what she had seen with her own eyes – a man’s legs actually growing out of stumps under the hand of someone with the gift of healing. Andrea knew something of the miraculous power of God in her own body, since she was violently allergic to rice. However, one cannot live for very long in the Philippines without having a meal of rice – rice is a staple. So she began to eat rice while on the mission field, and experienced no harm from it. However, when she ate rice back in North America, her reaction was as violent as ever. Thinking this through, Andrea decided that it was partly due to the fact she was doing the Lord’s work, and God graciously wanted to remove a barrier for her, but also that it was partly due to the kind of environment the Philippines was. Protestant missions began there only about 100 years ago, and the particular territory in which she was working regarded Christianity as a “new” religion. In other words, that church was in its apostolic age – its first hundred years of life. People, untouched by the Western enlightenment, were reading the Bible for the first time and taking it at its face value, expecting to see the signs and wonders of which it spoke. And so God confirmed their faith with the kind of

healings we read about in the book of Acts. Things, like the suspension of a rice allergy, like new legs visibly growing out of stumps, were possible in the Philippines, but remained impossible in North America.

That is a second-hand story, but Andrea’s testimony of that healing she had seen, certainly convinced *me* that such things are possible, though more likely to happen elsewhere in the Christian world, than they are here.

As I believe that the gift of miraculous healing is real, so I believe that there are those to whom the gift is given. Equally I know that I am not one of those who have it. Twice in my ministry I have prayed with a person and asked God for their healing. Twice God’s answer has been “no, not in that way.” And it is incredibly disappointing, when that happens, after you have put all your faith on the line and really expected that God *might* do the impossible thing that you’re asking. Perhaps this is why God seems to commend the practice of patient and sustained prayer-for-healing to his people, over against the prayer for a sudden miracle. If God has us in prayer over many months, it not only changes circumstances, it changes us. Even Jesus had to spend a little time struggling in repetitious prayer before he was able to hear God’s answer and gain the serenity to answer back: “thy will be done.”

I can cite many more stories of the truly miraculous things that happen when people are upheld through patient and sustained prayer. There is actual scientific data to support this. A study was done in California on the effect of prayer on recovery from heart problems. About two hundred heart patients were assigned to Christians who prayed for them, while an equal number, a control group, received no known prayers. Neither group knew about the prayers, yet those who received prayer developed half the complications that were experienced by those in the control group. A similar study by the Dartmouth Medical School examined the effect of prayer on healing when the patients prayed for themselves. The death rate six months after bypass surgery was 9

percent for the general population but 5 percent for those who prayed for their own healing.

This doesn't mean that people are healed by prayer. And that if we are not healed it's because we didn't have enough people or the right people praying for us. It means that healing comes from God, but a God who is faithful to his own promise when he says that those who ask, shall receive, and those who seek, shall find. Many of you have your own dramatic stories of healing through sustained prayer; I was convinced of its power, when a little girl called Anna was born. She was desperately premature and weighed less than 500 grams – that's one of the small yogurt tubs. She was smaller than a kitten, she was translucent, every vein showing through the skin. Her internal organs had not had time to develop fully. Anna was placed in an incubator and given a respirator, since she couldn't breathe on her own. The chances of damage to the windpipe and infections in such a case are extremely high. Anna's grandparents who were very important people in the development of my faith asked me to pray for her. They were great believers in prayer, so they asked everyone they knew to pray for Anna. Within a week or so, she was able to come off the respirator, she never had an infection, and she astonished the doctors daily with her rapid weight gain and normal development. That was in about 1991. In 1996 Anna's father began studies for the ministry at Presbyterian College, where I was student – something which, in itself, was part of the miracle. At our beginning of term retreat I remember Anna, whom I had not seen since those days in the incubator, rushing into her father's arms, a perfect, healthy, talkative, curious little five year old, and I think I mystified her to no end as the tears rolled down my face and I blessed God for his power to redeem life from death.

Of course there were people around the world praying for little Sam, the son of Sarah Travis who was formerly associate minister at Knox downtown. He suffered unspeakably and rejected three transplanted livers before his death last year from heart failure. Why, we are tempted to ask, did God listen to prayers for

Anna and not for Sam? Why did he deliver a healing for Anna’s family and not for Sam’s? The only possible answer is that God is free and that God is good – so that whatever he has done in his wisdom, he does not have to explain to us before we can trust that he has acted for the best.

With little Sam and with Ray Livingstone, and with others for whom we have prayed and not seen the desired result, I wonder really if healing did not occur. A skilled repairman can certainly fix an inkjet printer, but in most cases it is not worthwhile to do so. It makes much better sense just to buy a new one, maybe even to upgrade to a laser printer. Sometimes God answers our prayers for healing by giving us a life, a health and wholeness we cannot even guess at from this side of the veil. Being able to see both sides, death does not appear like the great trauma to God that it does to us. Jesus speaks from God’s perspective when he enters Jairus’ house of mourning and says so casually to those wailing women: “what are you getting all upset about? She’s not dead, she’s just asleep, and I’m going in now to wake her up.” In the days when Jesus ministered, people tended to think of death as the end, and so the answer to their prayers for healing had to intervene between illness and death, but we have had 2000 years following the resurrection of Jesus to learn to think differently. We have had 2000 years to expand our definition of Life – to realize that what we call life now is “only the cover and the title-page” (C.S. Lewis). Paul says “if our hope is for this life only, then we are of all people most to be pitied.” On Friday I shared with Ray a story about John Owen, that Christian giant of the 1600s who, when he was very ill wrote this answer to a friend who had enquired after his health: “I’m still in the land of the living...” he began. Then he scratched it out and wrote: “I’m still in the land of the dying, but hope I shall soon be in the land of the living.”

This table to which we turn now is a witness to the greater Life, set in the land of the dying, in the land of the broken, in the shadow of Good Friday. It offers a meal consisting of a body, wounded that we might be healed, and blood, poured out that we



“Does God heal today”

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might be gathered up. Very early in the church there arose the idea that somehow eating at this table preserved the bodies and souls of the faithful, unto everlasting life. So come, eat, drink, and be healed. Come and let the broken one make you whole.