

Jesus the Healer

Before Jesus called anyone to be His disciple, while He was still just getting to know the folks who lived in the sea-side town of Capernaum, Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law. She was lying down, weakened by a high fever, unable to do anything to make her guests feel welcomed and, we're told, "they" asked Jesus to help her. Who were "they"? We're never told, but it could be Simon or his wife, because that's whose home Jesus was in, or it could have been household servants. "Jesus, could you help?" What happened next seems strange to us: Jesus bent over the woman and spoke to the fever. Luke 4:39: "He bent over her and rebuked the fever, (stop it! leave her alone) and it left her. She got up at once and began to wait on them."

So Jesus rebukes a fever, it leaves and a woman's strength is instantly restored. By the way, if you've ever had a high fever, and the text says this was a 'high fever', say at least 103 or 104 degrees on the old scale that I still understand, do you just pop up and start working as soon as your head feels cooler? No, more typically you'll lie in bed and try to sleep off the exhaustion you feel from the fever. Jesus has done more than send the fever away - He has also removed the after-effects of the illness that had afflicted Simon's mother-in-law.

And what happens next? Verse 40:

When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying His hands on each one, He healed them.

Why does Luke tell us that the sun was setting? Because Jesus had been teaching in the synagogue that day, which meant that it was a Sabbath day and people would be at home, at rest, for the duration of the Sabbath, which had begun at sundown the previous day and would be ending now at this next sunset. Jesus had healed Simon's mother-in-law on the Sabbath, and the word had somehow spread, but the Jewish people were fully accepting of the Sabbath rest mandate and so would not venture out until sunset. But when the sunset came, the people poured out of their homes and headed to Simon's place. "Is the healer here? Is that man who spoke in the synagogue today staying with you? Is the man who cast the evil spirit out of the man in the service today -- is he here? I heard that he healed your mother today, that her fever was instantly gone -- is that true? Would he pray for me? Could he help my uncle?"

There has always been a tremendous need for healing. It seems that for every great new advance in medicine, there are new diseases that pose a challenge. Do you know of any extended family that doesn't face some kind of health problem? How many folks do you know who've never used pain killers, never needed surgery, never missed work due to illness? I'm certainly grateful that there was a surgeon ready and willing to take out my gall bladder when it was about to rupture and that someone expertly treated the broken bone at the end of my arm. But they couldn't help my son with his Crohn's disease and I know of so many others who can't get the help they need from a surgeon's skills or from pills in a bottle. Just like in Jesus' day, there are

many, many people who will line up outside the home of someone who has the power to heal them of relentless pain or of debilitating sickness. There are many who want to be able to sleep at night, or to return to activities they once enjoyed, or simply to feel healthy and energetic during their days. We sure could use a healer.

“Laying His hands on each one, He healed them.” Simple language to describe a ministry that gave life and hope back to people who were suffering. He touched them, and He made them well again. In Luke’s gospel, that’s how the healing ministry of Jesus began, with Him curing Simon’s mother-in-law from a fever and then laying hands on a procession of visitors who needed to get well.

The next chapter in Luke contains two accounts of Jesus healing. The first story starts in verse 12 in an unnamed place -- just, “one of the towns” -- where Jesus encounters a man who is covered with leprosy.

Leprosy is still quite common in countries like India where there are still over 700 ‘birtis’, or leper colonies, but very rare in Western nations like Canada which reports between 2 and 10 new cases each year. There is now treatment for a person with leprosy and over the past 20 years, 15 million people worldwide have been cured. But there are 3-4 million who are living with disabilities because they once had this condition. Leprosy is typically a progressive disease, causing permanent damage to the skin, nerves, limbs and eyes. The primary external sign is skin lesions and, when these appear, the patient is often isolated from other members of their community.

Because of this isolation, there tend to be many mental health issues attached to lepers: humiliation, fear, shame, rejection, depression, along with poverty and physical pain are common experiences for those with leprosy. In fact, many people don’t receive the treatment that would heal them because they run away and hide when they find they have leprosy. The stigma is so huge that it fills people with fear and shame. I read the experience of one Canadian man who, on finding that he had leprosy described himself as “shaken to the core”. No wonder: people who are found to have leprosy are thought to be highly contagious, ‘unclean’ or even sinful, in many parts of the world today.

In Jesus’ day there was no cure. People were isolated, were labelled as unclean, were kept away from the stream of life going on all around them. They were rejected and no one wanted to be near them, let alone touch them. And out of this desperate situation a man who is described as “covered with leprosy” comes to Jesus.

When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, “Lord, if You are willing, you can make me clean.”

You see from that little statement that the man saw himself as ‘unclean’.

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” He said. “Be clean!” And immediately the leprosy left him. Then Jesus ordered him, “Don’t tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.

Yet the news about Him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to

hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

I find that one little verse so powerful: "Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man." Jesus was not only concerned to heal the disease, but to heal the heart of a man who had known years of rejection and shame. He reached out His hand and touched the man who had walked through the streets calling out, "Unclean, unclean" and who had been shunned by his family, people who had once been his friends, by his neighbours -- to all he had become an outcast. Like the AIDS patient of today, he was often cut off from human touch, and Jesus knew that and touched the man to begin his healing.

It's interesting to me how Jesus addresses these different conditions. He rebuked a fever and told it to get out and here he simply tells the man, "Be clean!" and the leprosy is gone from his body. Something to notice and to think about as we encounter various healing stories.

Again, we see Jesus commanding silence -- "don't tell anyone" -- but asking instead for the man to show himself to the priest and offer sacrifices "as a testimony to them." Once the man had seen the priest, he would be restored to the community of Israel. His offering of sacrifices would be duly noted and his testimony would become a permanent record -- that he had been a leper, that Jesus had healed him of leprosy and that he had been pronounced clean and restored by the priest. This is the idea of testimony in this verse -- the evidence that Jesus was both powerful over disease and that He submitted Himself to the law of Moses.

We're still in chapter 5 and we come now to one of the most visually captivating healing accounts in the gospels.

One day as He was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for Him to heal the sick. Some men came, carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.

When Jesus saw their faith, He said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins ..." He said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God.

Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."

There is so much in this story -- it's a whole sermon or two in itself. But notice a few things with me:

1. The place was packed with religious leader types. Luke tells us that there were Pharisees and teachers of the law who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. This is like the first grand inquisition where the religious leaders come to check out the rumours they've been hearing about Jesus.
2. Notice what Jesus saw and heard. He saw faith -- He saw it in the act of the men who carried their friend on a mat in order to bring him to Jesus to be healed. He heard what the Pharisees were thinking to themselves, and confronted it.
3. Notice that when Jesus saw the faith of the paralytic's friends, He didn't immediately heal the man, but instead forgave his sins. Jesus doesn't follow our agenda, but follows what the Father shows Him to do -- in this case, the first order of business was to forgive the man's sins.
4. Notice the question that Jesus asked the religious guys: Which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven', or 'Get up and walk'? He was setting them up. There is only one possible answer to that question and that is that it's easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven", because that doesn't require any proof, any further evidence other than just saying the words. When you say to a person who is paralyzed, "Get up and walk", there has to be an action that accompanies your words. The person who can't move their limbs has to suddenly be able to get up on their feet and start walking. But Jesus sets up these religious folk by then saying, "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins - so you can be sure I have the right to do this", then he turns to the man on the mat and tells him to get up. That's a powerful story. Jesus confronts the skepticism of the religious people with a display of the miraculous power of God and, while He does that, He tells them that this is a demonstration of His authority. "You want to know if I have the authority to forgive sins? I'll show you by healing this paralyzed man."
5. Fifth thing to notice and that is from the crowds that were there to witness the healing. The crowds gave an honest reaction, as they often do in the gospels: "We have seen remarkable things today!"

I want to quickly include one more story. We're going to skip over the account of the healing of the centurion's servant, a story about Jesus showing favour to an officer in the Roman army because of the man's great faith and his evident understanding of who Jesus was. The next story in line, coming in the next verses, which start with Luke 7:11, is a story of the ultimate healing, raising the dead:

Soon afterward Jesus went to a town called Nain, and His disciples and a large crowd went along with Him. As He approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out -- the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, His heart went out to her and He said, "Don't cry." Then He went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help His people."

Again, notice the honesty of the crowd. It's so unreligious and so true to see a miracle and to say, "God must have done that!" The opposite reaction is to say, "He must be doing this by the power of Satan." Or, "who can forgive sins but God alone . . . and this guy sure can't be God."

It's not hard to piece together the key elements of this story. You can imagine what a son would mean to his widowed mother in a day long before social security. The only means of support she had was whatever her husband had left her, which might be a piece of land and a home, and what her children could provide for her. But now her only source of provision had been taken from her and she was part of a funeral procession heading out of town to bury her son. "When the Lord saw her, His heart went out to her and He said, 'Don't cry'." We've seen Him speak to evil spirits and to a fever and now He speaks to a dead man -- 'Get up!' And the man sat up in the coffin and began to speak -- and the text then tells us again what this was all about -- "and Jesus gave him back to his mother."

Theologians say that Jesus did a whole lot of miracles in order to establish His credibility, to prove, in essence, that He was and is the Son of God. They say that once Jesus had demonstrated His divinity through the powerful and wonderful works He did and once the church proved that they were worthy successors by performing healings in Jesus' name, that the whole thing died out. They say, in effect, that God stopped healing people with the end of the age of the apostles. I look at this story, and many like it, and I see that Jesus' heart went out to a desperate widow. I see Jesus reaching out to touch a shamed and unclean leper. I see Him respond to people who look at Him and say, "Can you help?" and He says, "Yes, I'm willing." Does that sound remotely like a person whose only goal is to prove who He is to a skeptical world, or does it sound like someone who is moved with compassion and who responds to people who have deep and painful needs? "God loved the world" is more than just words -- it's demonstrated in the life of Jesus.

Now, I want to close by saying what I learned from this study . . . and then I would like us to respond by taking communion and by seeking prayer. If you or someone you care about is sick today, then come for prayer after you've taken the elements.

Here's what I learned:

1. Jesus loves us so much that He tears up when He sees us in pain. Where we feel embarrassed, He feels great compassion. Where we might want to hide, He reaches out with a healing touch. And, here's the biggie, He wants us to feel that same compassion for the hurting, sick and desperate people who are all around us, every day. Will you pray? Will you show kindness? Will you represent this Jesus who cares so much about people?
2. I learn that there's no method, no one-size-fits-all model for how to pray for the sick. Jesus spoke to sickness on some occasions and to the sick on others. He forgave sins before healing one man and reached out to touch another before healing him. Touch was often a part of the healing, but on other occasions, just words were used. I was studying Jesus' healing the leper this week when I heard that Jesse Goerzen -

- Duane and Mel's second son -- had a brain tumour. I found myself compelled to speak to the tumour and to command it to shrink in the name of Jesus, just as a result of studying this passage.

3. Disease usually seems to involve more than just a few physical symptoms. There are emotional scars and heart needs that must also be addressed. Jesus touched the leper and he forgave the sins of the paralytic, in both cases before He healed their physical symptoms. When we pray for others, we should ask the Lord how to pray, because there will be other, deeper things that need to be addressed as well.

What have you seen in these passages? Are you willing to extend the compassion of Jesus to the sick?