



Jesus is a healer – even when not everyone is healed

Sermon for Sunday, Feb. 7, 2021 (5th Sunday after the Epiphany Year B)

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In last week's Gospel reading, we heard a story about Jesus performing an exorcism. This week, we have more exorcisms and healings of various kinds.

So much of Jesus's ministry was about healing – so much of it!

We have story after story of Jesus healing someone from illness, casting out demons from them, and even restoring them to life after they had died. Peter's mother-in-law in this story, the man born blind, the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years, the paralyzed man who laid by the pools of Bethesda, the little girl called Tabitha, the widow's son in the town of Nain, the stories go on and on. Jesus was a healer. We hear these stories during the Season After the Epiphany, this season when we focus on Jesus's identity, because healing was central to who he was, and part of the way he revealed his divine nature and appointment.

Healing is one of the main things we pray for in the church. When things aren't going well, when they're sick or broken or disturbed, people turn to God. They turn to us as the church because we are a community who professes to be in connection with God, and they ask for our prayers.

Whenever we pray for healing, though, it can raise a lot of theological questions. Why do we sometimes see miraculous results from prayers for healing, while other times our prayers seem to have no discernable effect on someone's physical health, and sometimes the very thing we pray would NOT happen actually does?

When I was in college, a friend of mine from high school lost his father suddenly, unexpectedly, tragically – he fell over dead while mowing the lawn, this man in his 40s who was otherwise entirely healthy. Several years later, this same friend's mother was diagnosed with leukemia. When I heard the news, I was frustrated and angry at the injustice of yet another tragedy affecting this same family. I was insistent that my friend's mother could NOT die. "This can't happen," I thought. "My friend can't lose both his parents before he turns 25!" I summoned all the prayer warriors I knew: in my family, in my church, anyone who would listen. We

prayed fervently that my friend's mother wouldn't die... and yet, after a relatively short battle, she did.

On the other side of the equation, we have a recent story from within this very parish of a miraculous healing – Robbie Kilpatrick's eyesight, after nearly a year of being compromised, was restored in ways that even doctors couldn't explain.

You may have had experiences in your own life where you were blown away by the power of prayer and other experiences where prayer seemed to have no effect.

As we are surrounded by illness and death in the midst of this global pandemic, I'm constantly flabbergasted by how some people can be infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus and not even know they have it or have very mild symptoms, while others wind up in the hospital on respirators or dead. If there's ever been a time when the entire world was praying over something, it's got to be this pandemic – just think of how many people are praying for healing for their loved ones and friends, and yet over 400,000 of them have died in this country alone. We know some things about what makes certain people more susceptible to serious illness and death than others, but we're constantly hearing more stories of young, otherwise healthy people with no pre-existing conditions who die from this virus anyway.

How can this be, if the whole world is praying for relief from this plague? Why do our prayers for healing sometimes seem to go unanswered?

I don't have an answer to this question, and I confess it's one that used to keep me up at night. Here's what I can offer:

Jesus was a healer – but he didn't heal everyone. I don't know why he didn't, but he didn't. He didn't fix everything that was wrong with everyone he encountered even in his lifetime on this earth.

If we believe Jesus was God, and God is all-powerful, then theoretically Jesus COULD have healed everyone, and God COULD heal everyone now if he chose to do so.

But that didn't happen in Jesus's lifetime, and it continues not to happen.

Why not??

For me, I have to believe that there's some reason for this. A world in which everything is random and according to chance, with no meaning or purpose behind it, doesn't fit with the spiritual framework I believe in because of the God that I know in Jesus.

Ultimately, I'm left thinking that there must be some reason why certain people are healed and others aren't, but whenever I start speculating about what exactly those reasons might be, I get myself into trouble. It leads me down paths where I start wondering whether some people's lives are more valuable to God than others, or if God likes or dislikes some people more than others because of the physical tragedies that befall them in this life.

None of that speculating is helpful, so I ultimately come back to that passage from Isaiah that we encounter regularly in the Canticles in Morning and Evening Prayer: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord" (Isaiah 55:8). I have to trust that there is a reason, and admit at the same time that I don't know and maybe even can't know the reason. So much of what it means to have faith is to be able to be comfortable with paradox, with things that are seemingly contradictory and yet are both true.

God is all-powerful and benevolent. Suffering and death continue despite prayers for their end. Jesus is a healer. Not everyone is healed.

Sometimes we simply have to sit with the paradox, and return to the deepest truths of our faith, even when we don't see any examples of it in our lived experience. In fact, it's in those times when we need those truths the most.

My friend lost both his parents before age 25.

Thousands of people continue to die in this pandemic each day.

Mental illness and chronic physical pain and societal conflict and violence and earthquakes and fires and floods and every kind of suffering imaginable continues to happen, day after day after day.

And yet – "those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength." (Isaiah 40:31)

And yet – "God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless." (Is. 40:29)

And yet – Jesus is a healer.

And yet – even at the grave we make our song, "Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia."

Sometimes, we just need to repeat those truths to ourselves, even precisely when we most doubt them. One way we protect ourselves from disappointment is to lower our expectations; if we don't expect that God will heal us, we won't be disappointed when he doesn't.

When you find yourself in doubt or despair at the suffering in the world, don't fall into that defense mechanism that shields you from the possibility of harm. Instead, reiterate your faith in God's healing power.

To help you do that, take a quiet moment to meditate on one of the many stories of Jesus healing in the scriptures. Let go of any feelings of anger about why Jesus healed the person in the Bible story and hasn't healed you or your friend or loved one, and instead just really focus on the power of God's love made manifest in the person of Jesus. See his hands laid on the person, the warm glow of healing energy flowing from him to them, and open yourself to receive that same healing into your own heart.

Jesus is a healer.

"Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength." (Isaiah 40:31)

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." (Psalm 147:30)