

Reverend Jim's Sermon for October 27, 2024

Why Did Jesus Heal?

The Gospels' record 23 occasions on which Jesus healed one or more people. That doesn't include passages such as when Jesus went throughout Galilee preaching and healing the sick. We don't know how many people he healed, but it was a big part of what he did, and this preaching and healing is somewhat unique in Jesus. I don't believe healing was part of the life work of Mohamed, or the Buddha. In the Hebrew Bible there are some instances where people are healed as an answer to prayer, but very few.

Among the great religious sages of the world, Jesus was the one who healed. In the story from the Gospel of Mark that we heard just now, we have a story of the healing of a blind beggar. And one of the lessons in this story, as in all the stories of miraculous healings in the Gospels, is that Jesus never healed anyone who didn't first ask to be healed. There had to be an expression of the desire to be healed. *Merciful God.*

Receive our prayer

Today's Gospel begins with the blind beggar's pleading for mercy. And what is Jesus' response? He says, "What do you want me to do for you?" And only when the blind man specifically asks that his sight be returned, is he healed.

In the Monty Python film, *Life of Brian* there is a scene in which a very fit man comes bouncing up to Brian and says "Alms for an ex-leper."

BRIAN: Did you say... 'ex-leper'?

EX-LEPER: That's right, sir. Sixteen years behind the bell, and proud of it, sir.

BRIAN: Well, what happened?

EX-LEPER: I was cured, sir.

BRIAN: Cured?

EX-LEPER: Yes, sir, a miracle, sir.

BRIAN: Who cured you?

EX-LEPER: Jesus did, sir. I was hopping along, minding my own business. All of a sudden, up he comes. Cures me. One minute I'm a leper with a trade, next minute my livelihood's gone. Not so much as a by your leave. 'You're cured mate.'

This exchange is funny precisely because the writers of the skit knew (and assumed that the viewer knew) that Jesus would never heal someone unless they first asked to be healed.

Perhaps the lesson here is simply an encouragement to ask for, the healing that we need. We won't get the healing we want unless we ask for it.

And there is a wider lesson as well, that clearly communicating our needs is the only way to get them met, in general, by anyone in any situation. Psychologist Marshall Rosenberg says that it is better to state our needs clearly than to play games with each other. This requires that we understand what our needs are, and how they differ from wants. And it requires clear communication.

I was at a workshop with Marshall when he talked about one woman who was frustrated with her husband because he wouldn't follow one of her household procedures. Marshall asked her if she had specifically told her husband what she wanted. "No" she said. "So you want him to read your mind?" Rosenberg asked. The woman answered, "Of course! He's my husband! He should know what I want without me having to ask!"

While God knows what healing we need, we still need to ask. Our needs are sacred because they bind us to one another and to God, and expressing our needs to God in faith, is a big part of our practice. What is the liturgy, but one long acknowledgement of our needs for healing, for forgiveness, for daily bread. Ask and you shall receive, knock and the door shall be open. To a great extent the Bible describes God simply as the one who answers prayers, and we are the ones who recognize that God is the source of all we need, and we pray to remind and recommit ourselves to our faith in God's goodness.

But what about the prayers that don't get answered?

All good things, including healing, come to us in ways that we don't always expect. As the lyrics of one song go: "Fortune presents gifts, not according to the book, when you expect whistles it's flutes, when you expect flutes it's whistles."

I believe that there are two kinds of prayer, or two kinds of answers to prayer.

Some prayers are for our *wants* to be met and met in the particular way that we want them to be met. These are specific prayers for specific things to happen. We all pray like this at times. But generally speaking, that isn't how prayer works. Because God isn't a vending machine, and because it often isn't possible anyways. If God were to answer specific prayers in specific ways, whose prayer would he answer? The 100 million Americans who are praying that Donald Trump be elected, or the 100 million Americans who are praying that he is not elected. See what I mean?

Prayer requires asking and then receiving, and the receiving of God's grace requires us to be open to having that grace come to us in ways that we would never have expected. So, the other kinds of prayer or answers to prayer are prayers of need. Our faith is that we will always receive what we need from God, our daily bread, forgiveness, mercy, love. These things can come to us in an infinite number of ways. They may not always come to us in ways we expect, they usually don't, but they will always come. We will always be given everything we need, we just need to be able to recognize it when it comes, and to let go of our preferences.

You know the story of the fellow stuck on his rooftop in a flood. He was praying to God for help. Soon a man in a rowboat came by and the fellow shouted to the man on the roof, "Jump in, I can save you." The stranded fellow shouted back, "No, it's OK, I'm praying to God and he is going to save me."

One of the things we know that is not a need, is to live forever in these physical bodies we have been given. We might regret that we have to pass out of our physical self, but we know the time will come when we must do so.

So what was Jesus doing when he healed? Even when he raised Lazarus from the dead, he was only putting off the inevitable. Jesus didn't make anyone immortal. But he did heal. Why did he?

There are lots of possible answers to this, traditional answers: Jesus healed to show that he was divine. He healed out of compassion. He healed to increase the faith of the people.

But there is another way to look at the healings of Jesus. We imagine him as being full of divine energy, the power of God. And since this was the case, we can imagine that that divine power emanating from him in a way that was obvious to those he encountered. They could see it. Feel it coming from him. I don't imagine that Jesus manipulated that power like a magician doing magic tricks. It was just there, in him, and it was available to anyone who truly opened themselves to it. It could be argued that Jesus didn't heal at all, at least he didn't do anything specific to perform healings. What did he say to the blind beggar? Not I have made you see, but "Go, your faith has made you well." This same phrase or one like it, is found in the majority of healing stories in the Gospels.

It is our openness to Jesus' divine power that facilitates healing. It is our recognition of the divine spark in ourselves and in our neighbours that brings about wellness. It is our faith in the presence of the divine spirit everywhere in everything that makes us whole.

Why did Jesus heal? I think that perhaps Jesus healed because he couldn't do otherwise. It was no more a choice than is our choice to love our children and grandchildren. The choice, it is so clear, in every healing in the Gospels, was the choice of the one being healed, it was in every case a direct result of faith expressed. The medicine was in the encounter

between the divine energy that Jesus exuded and the open heart of the supplicant seeking to be healed.

This is prayer at its most powerful, and its simplest. Openness to the divine spirit that is in us, and in the world around us. It is the blindness to this spirit that is perhaps what is most in need of healing in our world. So let us pray that we might be healed and that not just our eyes, but our minds and hearts might be opened to perceive the presence of the divine in our lives this morning and in the days to come.