

Healing Stories

Today we've got a couple more healing stories to go with the one from last week. On the surface, you might just look at these stories as accounts of Jesus' ability to perform miracles. But to only go there leaves us with all sorts of questions and problems – like why don't they happen more often? Why doesn't everyone get a miracle?

We'll say a bit about that later on – a more in depth conversation would be a whole other sermon.

But I think the real meat in these stories lies in the encounters between the people and Jesus. That's also what gives us something for our own lives.

So here's where we'll start – healing and cure are not the same thing.

Scientific understandings of the world and of the human body have led to some amazing things. During Advent I preached about the interconnectedness of faith and science. I love science. And even though I left medicine, I still recognize the amazing benefits of advances in medical science.

But even when I was still practicing medicine, I often felt we were missing something...not quite getting to the heart of things.

As science has given us more and more dramatic cures, one mistake we have made is that of equating cure with healing and leaving it at that. And then we've turned the whole of healing over to medical professionals. We've replaced healing with cure.

And we've turned healing into a commodity.

To see what I'm talking about, let's look first at the woman with the hemorrhages. First of all let's be clear about her problem...this is uterine bleeding. In medical terms it would be called abnormal uterine bleeding and it's not an uncommon problem even today.

Doctors in those days had very little concept of the internal structure and function of anything in the body. I don't know what treatments the doctors tried, but not only did they not work, it cost her everything she had. And she got worse. With some medical problems, this of course still happens, even today.

For this particular scenario, we also need to talk about the religious laws the Jewish people lived under. Menstrual blood flow created a period of ritual uncleanness. Now that doesn't have anything to do with sin.

But there would be a time during a woman's period when she needed to stay separate from others and couldn't participate in temple worship and sacrifice.

Imagine if a woman is in that state all the time. This would have been a very isolating condition.

Second, she'd spent all her money – she was now poor as well as sick. And as a woman in that era, she's already at the lower end of the social hierarchy. So her illness not only makes her sick, it makes her even more marginalized and cut off from her community.

She just wants to be cured. She fights her way through this mob, gets close enough to Jesus to touch his robe, and it happens...she's cured. She might have been fine with that. Jesus could have kept on walking toward Jairus' home.

But cure isn't the same thing as healing and it isn't enough for Jesus. He turns...tries to find her. Then he looks her in the eye...and calls her daughter. No longer is she to live on the edges of her community, forever unclean. Healing is about paying attention to and taking time with those who suffer. Healing is about restoring to community, it's about restoring to dignity and worth. And honestly, those things can happen without a cure. And given the potent mind and body connections that at least some researchers are paying attention to, one wonders how much more healing could happen if we aim for something more than cure.

So this little encounter with the woman delayed Jesus from getting to Jairus' home.

Jairus is at the other end of the social hierarchy. He's a Jewish male and a leader in the synagogue – probably something like a church council president. Jesus clearly has compassion and sympathy for his plight and that of his dying child, and rightly so. But he doesn't make Jairus more important than the woman.

In spite of the urgency of Jairus' request, Jesus still takes time for this poor, chronically ill woman. When healing becomes a commodity, as it is in our society, odds are pretty good the woman on the lower end will not get what Jairus gets.

However much health care providers in our society want to be equitable and disregard people's ability to pay or type of health care coverage, the system doesn't work that way. When curing illness is a commodity, the system is destined to be unequal. It's clear that's not how Jesus operates.

So let's move now to the third part of this passage and then we'll come back and talk about so what.

Jairus' daughter died. Jesus says she's sleeping, not dead. That would make this story resuscitation, not resurrection. But I think it's supposed to be a story of resurrection.

From what I've read, it seems this this notion of sleep probably has to do with Mark's audience, the early church after Jesus death and resurrection.

Sleep was used as the descriptor for death with the idea that resurrection is then this awakening from death.

To think about the story, we will assume that the people in that room with the little girl knew how to diagnose death, and that she was dead.

Cure does not always happen. Miracles don't always happen. We pray and pray and pray and the hoped for miracle cure does not happen. Our loved one dies.

The truth is death comes eventually to all of us. We struggle most with the untimely deaths...like the little girl in the story. We wonder why Jesus doesn't cure all sick children, or prevent accidents or things like that.

I think God lets life unfold as it does because to manipulate it and intervene would take away its beauty. Pain it seems will always be part of this life. God's promises do not take that away...and they don't take death away.

For all of us, whether it's at 12 or 20 or 90, eventually cure does not happen. But healing still does.

Healing still happens because on Easter Sunday, God will say to Jesus, buried in the tomb, get up. And Jesus will. Here, Jesus says the same thing to this little girl...get up. And she does. Death does not win. The final healing is death...and resurrection. The story is like a preview of what's to come, for Jesus and for us.

OK, so what of all this do we take into our lives.

First of all, as I said, we have equated healing with curing and left it all to the medical professionals. In a system where curing is a commodity, time is of the essence. Medical professionals are too often not allowed the time to really see people, as Jesus did the woman with the hemorrhage.

But that doesn't mean we as the church need to leave it at that. We can be the ones who walk alongside the sick...no matter what their status. We can walk alongside the ones with mental illness and HIV and chronic pain and all the illnesses that isolate people. We can walk alongside those who suffer, no matter what their insurance coverage is. We can pray...and believe that prayer matters.

We can take the time to visit the sick and send cards and notes and balloons. It really does matter to people.

The other implication these stories hold for us as Christians is how we approach health care in our nation. Health care is a political issue. So as you think about voting in this coming year, we will have a variety of proposals regarding health care from different candidates. What options would do equally well for the Jairuses in our world and the people who are poor, sick and isolated like the woman with the hemorrhage?

And finally, we can be there when curing fails. We can be present in the midst of the healing process for those whose life is ending and for those who grieve. We can trust that those we lose will hear the same thing this little girl did...and it will be Jesus, holding out his hand, and he'll say get up.