

"Voila! You Are Healed! Really?"
Luke 8:40-56
August 28, 2022
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Many sermon titles can be read and understood immediately. Others need to be **heard** so that you grasp the nuance, the real meaning the writer intended. If you just read the title for today's sermon you might read to yourself, "Voila! You are Healed. Really!" But that would miss the whole point of this sermon. If you hear it this way- "Voila! You are Healed! Really?" it changes the whole meaning. Do you hear the difference?

With a different emphasis on the final word, suddenly this sermon isn't about the confirmation of someone being healed, it is a skeptical response to the claim of healing.

(If you are reading this sermon, you will have to read it aloud yourself. If you wish to hear me read it, click on the link for the zoom recording below.) https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/EybbEe9HDz8yh5wxQE3clSw7zBigl6BDEuWQe3eFnS5mzingBHbbON1YFjU9sH_P.kR7Y5LQq6QYnyQ73
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And that, my friends, is where I find myself seven months after an injury that is still healing.

I wish healing today was as easy as it seems in biblical stories. Jesus sees a need; he speaks to or touches someone and "Voila! They are healed!" And the person gets up and walks, or opens their eyes and sees, or even climbs out of their death bed and everyone is in awe of what just happened.

I think we can all agree that healing doesn't often happen that way for us. The danger of reading the Bible literally is that we then expect every single thing that is recorded in the Bible to happen to us today. The Bible isn't intended to be a "how to" book. It is the story of the relationship between God and God's people. It is the story of how God invaded our world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The biblical stories point toward the power of God and God's desire for humanity to be whole in mind, body, spirit, and community. A literal reading of scripture sets us up for great disappointment, a distorted view of God, and perhaps even a crisis of faith.

Sometimes I wish the healing stories weren't even in the Bible. Many years ago, I knew of a woman who was dying of cancer. She was a dedicated member of the congregation and a faithful Christian. Her husband sat by her bedside and actually said to her, "If you had stronger faith, you wouldn't be dying." His literal reading of scripture convinced him that healing was hers for the taking if she only had loved God just a little bit more.

That's how we explain away the terrible tragedies of life. We need to have a reason for suffering. We must believe that God wanted it to happen, otherwise, how can we live in a world where anyone at anytime could be struck down? And yet, that is exactly the world we live in.

I saw a church sign this week that read, "Pain is inevitable. Suffering is not." Really? It makes me wonder if the person who put those letters on the sign leads a charmed life where nothing bad has ever happened. It is trite sayings like that which make us think we deserve the bad things that happen to us and to others.

Of course, sometimes we make poor decisions that lead to pain and suffering for ourselves and for others. But for most of us, pain and suffering are just a part of our lives as frail and vulnerable human beings.

When I fell on the icy sidewalk last February, I only had myself to blame. I saw the ice when I arrived at the church that morning and I walked around it and intended to find the bag of salt and spread it on the icy patches. I got distracted and totally forgot about it. I forgot, until I found myself lying on my back on the ground.

On that cold morning, God didn't think, "You know, Christy could use a lesson in faith. I think I will let her slip and fall and then she can become a better Christian."

Do you see how ridiculous that sounds? That kind of thinking makes God a monster. It makes God untrustworthy. The God I have come to know in the person of Jesus suffered with me during those long months of recovery.

A few years ago, Kate Bowler was living the good life. Here is what she writes in her book, *EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON AND OTHER LIES I'VE LOVED*.

"Married in my twenties, a baby in my thirties, I won a job at my alma mater straight out of graduate school. I felt breathless with the possibilities. Actually, it is getting harder to remember what it felt like, but I don't think it was anything as simple as pride. It was certainty, plain and simple, that God had a worthy plan for my life in which every setback would also be a step forward. I wanted God to make me good and make me faithful, with

just a few shining accolades along the way. Anything would do if hardships were only detours on my long life's journey. I believed God would make a way.

I don't believe that anymore."

The day that all changed was the day she was diagnosed with Stage 4 colon cancer at age 35. She writes, *"Anyone who has lived in the aftermath of something like this knows that it signifies the arrival of three questions so simple that they seem, in turn, too shallow and too deep.*

Why?

God, are you here?

What does this suffering mean?"

Kate's world of certainty had ended but others were happy to explain to her why God "allowed" this happen. "Everything happens for a reason," they told her. "God has a better plan for your life." And she writes, *"Apparently God is also busy going around closing doors and opening windows. God can't get enough of that."* She knew that if she should die of this cancer *"some beautiful moron would tell my husband that 'God needed another angel,' because God is sadistic like that."*

In the years since her diagnosis, she has endured multiple surgeries, difficulties with her insurance company, an abundance of pain medication, and chemotherapy. She was admitted to a clinical trial with a new chemotherapy treatment that is thus far, keeping her alive.

Kate has found that there are three life lessons people try to teach her. She writes, *"Frankly, they sometimes feel worse than cancer itself."*

The first come from people she calls the "Minimizers" who tell her she shouldn't be upset about having cancer because heaven is her true home, and she should be looking forward to death. Kate wants to ask them if they would like to go home first.

The second life lesson comes from the "Teachers" who tell her that through her suffering God is trying to teach her something. One person wrote her a letter that said, *"I suppose that this is the ultimate test of faith for you. I'll pray for your remission, and if you die that your suffering is minimal."*

She thinks the hardest lessons come from the "Solutions People" who are a little disappointed that she doesn't have enough faith to save herself. They encourage her to

honestly tally up her sins so she can understand why God has given her cancer. She finds cruelty in the words of those who are perfectly certain and have all the answers.

Luckily for Kate, she was and is surrounded by a beloved community, family and friends who sat with her in her grief and just loved her without offering any solutions. Since there was nothing her loved ones could do to get rid of the cancer, they did everything else- laundry, cooking, cleaning, babysitting. One of the best visits she had was from a friend who is a pediatric oncologist. He just sat with her and said, "This is awful. I am so sorry this is happening to you."

Because of the clinical trial and the experimental drugs she receives through a port in her chest, Kate continues to outlive all predictions of Stage 4 Colon Cancer. She is living her life, but she is also still suffering, still dealing with pain, and still making regular hospital visits to receive chemotherapy. She hasn't found all of the answers to life's hard questions, and she is ok with that.

We find many healing stories in the *Gospel of Luke*, perhaps that is why tradition claims that Luke was a doctor. Chapter eight is packed with miracles, parables, a perilous journey across a stormy lake, and a visit to the foreign land of the *Gerasenes* where Jesus healed a man possessed by demons. When Jesus and his disciples return to the Jewish side of the lake they were met by a large crowd who wanted to hear his teachings and maybe even ask for a miracle or two.

A man named Jairus met Jesus at the shore and begged him to heal his young daughter. The gospel describes Jairus as a leader in the synagogue. This means he was a well-respected religious man who was probably wealthy. He could have even been among those in the synagogue's leadership who were growing concerned about Jesus's increasing popularity. And yet, when his daughter was deathly ill, he swallowed his pride, fell at Jesus's feet, and begged for help. Apparently, Jesus didn't care about Jairus's politics because he went with him, no questions asked. The child was dying. There was no time to waste.

As Jesus, his disciples, and the desperate father pushed through the crowd on their mission of mercy, there was also a suffering woman on her own mission. This woman had been ill for twelve years, chronically bleeding, losing strength, money, and self-esteem in her search for a cure. According to Jewish law, her constant bleeding meant she was unclean, she was not welcome in the synagogue and her mere presence in the crowd was a danger to everyone else. If someone accidentally touched her, they would also be considered unclean. They would have to undergo specific rituals of purification before they would be welcome in society again.

She was so intent on reaching Jesus that none of that mattered to her. When she was finally close enough, she stretched out her arm and with the tips of her fingers, touched the hem of his robe. Can you imagine the courage it took for this woman to do such an audacious thing? It was totally outrageous and unacceptable. But I am guessing she was beyond caring about what was acceptable. She was desperate. She had no one to speak up for her.

Somehow, she knew Jesus was her last hope. Perhaps she thought she could just touch his garment and then disappear back into the crowd and no one would even know she was there. But someone knew she was there. The instant she touched the cloth of his robe, Jesus knew. As she felt the healing power rush through her broken body, Jesus turned and asked, "Who touched me?"

The disciples thought this was a ridiculous question because **everyone** was touching him. There were so many people they could hardly move. And why was Jesus stopping? The life of a child was hanging in the balance. Jairus was freaking out! But Jesus knew and the woman knew that something extraordinary had just happened. Jesus stopped in his tracks and waited. And then she fell to her knees before him and said, "It was me." When the people saw who it was, they were horrified. They knew her, they had shunned her and abandoned her, and they kept their distance. Then she told Jesus and everyone else what she had been through. She poured out her story of illness, vulnerability, exploitation, and hopelessness. Then she declared that the power of Jesus had healed her- right there.

Jesus reached out to her and said, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace." In front of everyone he claimed her as his own. In that moment her soul was healed as well as her body. Jesus made it clear that this woman, his daughter, was welcome in his family and beloved by God.

If Jesus was concerned with only physical healing, he could have just kept walking, knowing that someone had touched him and been healed. But he stopped and asked, "Who touched me?" because he was more concerned about relationship- about intimacy. He looked that unnamed woman in the eye and claimed her as his own. Even though he was on an important mission, he wanted to meet the one who had been healed. He wanted to know who she was, and he wanted her to know who she was. She was his daughter.

And then the word came that Jairus was dreading. A messenger came from his house and said, "Don't bother the Teacher any longer. Your daughter is dead." Dead at 12 years old- the same number of years that woman had been suffering. Can you imagine Jairus's agony? Apparently, Jesus could because he said to the grieving father, "Don't be afraid" and continued to his house.

When they arrived, the professional mourners were already there, earning their money. When Jesus told them to stop weeping because the child was not dead, they just laughed at him. He went to her room with only her parents and three disciples, took her hand, and said, "Child, get up!" And she did. Right there, in front of her devastated parents, another daughter is restored to life, restored to her family. Jesus told them to get her something to eat- perhaps to prove that she was, indeed, alive.

These two intertwining stories break so many religious and cultural taboos of the time I hardly know where to begin to unravel them. The unnamed woman who had bled for twelve years was probably a widow. The 12 year-old girl was still too young to be married. The fact that they were both female and unmarried meant that they were of little value to their society. They were both unclean- one because of blood and the other because of death. They were both untouchable- until Jesus touched them. Jesus is not made unclean by touching them. They are made whole from his touch.

Perhaps the focus of these stories from Luke's gospel is not so much about miraculous healing as they are about relationships. We see in these two stories that through the love of Jesus, two people move from isolation to community. The older woman had no community at all due to her illness. The little girl had a loving community, but her death took her away from those who loved her. By healing them, Jesus restored both to full participation in their community.

When Jesus heals people, it isn't just for that one person alone to enjoy- it is to be shared and celebrated by the community to which they return.

One of the things I learned quite quickly after my fall is that illness isolates us from our community. In those early days and weeks, suffering and pain became the focus of my life, leaving little room for anything else. I knew you were thinking of me and praying for me. I knew my family and friends cared about me, but I often didn't have the energy to answer phone calls or to welcome visitors. It was a lonely time, I think, both for Marty and for me. When you couldn't do anything to ease my suffering you did what you could- brought meals, offered prayers, sent cards- I never realized how many different cards have a dog on the front and the word, "HEAL!" on the inside.

I wish I could tell you that I have some great theological insight to share with you as a result of my ordeal. But I don't. If you read the letter I sent a few weeks ago you have an idea of what Marty and I have been through since that cold February day. Many of my days were filled with pain, with calls to various doctors seeking a correct diagnosis and treatment, or to the insurance company begging for compassion. Initially, our world became very small- pain medication, doctor appointments, physical therapy- that's about it. I am grateful that none of you told me "everything happens for a reason," or "it could have been worse." I doubt I would have been comforted by those words.

I struggled with how to end this sermon. But maybe the ending hasn't been written yet. Maybe that is what we do together- here in this place, in this beloved community, in this faith fellowship. Together maybe we can ask the hard questions and together maybe we can live without having all of the answers. Amen.