

What Does It Mean to Be Healed?

Healing. Every week in the prayers of the people and in our personal prayers as well we pray for healing – for people who are struggling with illness of every kind, for relationships that are broken and in need of healing, for healing for our world. We long for healing, and it is God alone who offers the complete healing and wholeness we need. One of the things that is absolutely clear is that Jesus was a healer. In encounter after encounter in the gospels, Jesus heals people. It is an amazing, wondrous thing, one of the clear signs in the eyes of the gospel writers that Jesus was sent from God. We and our world are in need of healing. Jesus is the One who brings the healing we need.

Yet in our Disability Ministry Mission and beliefs we don't say anything about healing. This is not because we don't believe healing is a part of our calling as Christians, but because understanding the role of Jesus' healing in relationship to disabilities in our time is complex. The healing encounters in the Bibles are also some of the most difficult gospel stories for us to deal with today partly because our understanding of disability and disease has changed so much since Jesus' time. Jesus didn't know anything about viruses or bacteria. The ability to restore sight in a blind person was seen as much a matter of forgiveness and faith as it was a medical issue. Disability was often understood to be related to sin and mental illness was seen as demonic possession rather than being caused by genetics or disease or chemical imbalances in the body. There are things in these stories that don't make sense or seem just wrong to us now. And yet we still affirm – Jesus heals.

So how do we make sense of the role of Jesus' healing in our faith today? What, if anything, do we really expect to happen when we pray? How do we, as a community of Jesus-followers, understand the relationship between disability and healing and how does that understanding affect what we do? And maybe above all the question to ask is "What does it mean to be healed? And where does that healing come from?" These are important questions as we look at our call to be a church for people with disabilities and differences. Today we're going to look at some of the healing stories in the gospels and see if we can come to some kind of understanding of what Jesus did that informs our understanding of what we are called to do. I have

been guided in this by Bethany Devenny Fox's work in her book, "Disability and the Way of Jesus".

A starting place, I think, is the question Jesus asks the man lying by the pool of Bethzatha, a man who has been lying there with a disability for thirty-eight years. "Do you want to be healed?" For those of us looking from the outside, the answer is, "Yes, obviously, why are you even bothering to ask the question?" But it's an important question to ask. It gives the person choice over what will happen to them. It treats them as a human being with the right to make their own decisions. For many in what we consider the disability community, what looks like a disability to others is really a part of their identity, a part of what makes them who they are, one more variation on what it means to be made in the image of God. So some folks on the autism spectrum enjoy the differences of the way they interact with the world and think their unique perspective adds to the richness of the community around them. When cochlear implants were developed that would allow many deaf folks to hear for the first time, there was an active – and ongoing – debate in the Deaf community about whether getting the implants would be a betrayal of their Deaf culture, meaning they would lose the uniqueness of who they are. Nathaniel Veltman, a PhD Student at Fuller Seminary who is deaf tells about a time a man offered to take him to a "healing house" downtown where he could be healed. Veltman says, "He ignored my comments about not needing to be healed. If he had listened a little more carefully he might have detected a little bit of pride in having a hearing loss. I think it's pretty cool being a cyborg (Veltman has a cochlear implant) . Lip reading can be fun. But on an even deeper level the idea of being healed is difficult to imagine – I can't imagine what my life would be like without hearing loss. The very idea of healing feels like something would be taken away from me." Like Veltman, for many folks what others see as disability they see as unique differences to be affirmed and included. There is no need to be healed.

Even when that is not the case, the person being healed needs to be seen first as a person, a person who can make choices. I remember one story of a woman who uses a wheelchair who visited a new church and found herself being wheeled over to a corner after worship so people could pray over her for healing. Regardless of whether she wanted to be healed or not, the choice to ask and accept healing is hers. This case is not an isolated incident. I've heard variations of it from a number of people.

One thing that's important when we think about how Jesus heals is to recognize that Jesus sees the person first and then gives them a choice. We need to do the same, and listen for the answer before we assume what it is.

A second question to think about is what does healing mean in the community of Jesus? It seems obvious but also important to say that one piece of healing always involves the body. The reason it's important to say is that sometimes we think Jesus is only interested in the spiritual side of who we are and the body isn't as important or isn't something we should be concerned with. But Jesus starts by healing the body. The body is a part of the whole person and can't be ignored or simply set aside. It is significant.

The healing starts with the body, but it doesn't end there. For the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, her illness been a struggle on several levels. According to Jewish law a woman who was menstruating or bleeding from other causes was unclean. She could not engage in many ordinary parts of life. She couldn't participate in religious life. She couldn't completely be a wife to her husband. There were rituals she would have to go through before she could be a part of her community again. For this woman, this uncleanness, this separation from her community had continued for twelve years. But when Jesus healed her, he also healed her relationship with the community around her. She was no longer isolated or alone.

For the woman, her healing also meant that her financial situation was healed. For twelve years she had spent everything she had on one medical treatment after another, hoping that something would work. When Jesus healed her, that drain on her finances ended. She was made financially whole.

But one more thing happened as well. Her relationship with Jesus was transformed by her healing and her faith. When she first reached out to touch Jesus, it was an anonymous hand reaching through a crowd. The story ends with her kneeling in front of him as Jesus calls her "daughter". She has truly come home.

One of the things this story shows is a constant through all the healing stories – that as Jesus meets those he heals, he consistently offers the gift of his presence with compassion. While we may not be able to accomplish miraculous healings, that gift of presence with compassion is something we can give on another and I have learned that simply doing that offers healing in itself.

In all the stories of Jesus healing, there's another "character" so to speak in the story in addition to Jesus and the person being healed. The community around them is also always there. Sometimes the community is "innocent bystanders", people who just happened to be around to witness the healing. Often some of the community around Jesus and the people being healed, specifically the religious leaders, are upset by what they see and confront Jesus. In the story Leslie read this morning, the community around the paralyzed man takes a more active role, as the man's friends not only bring him to Jesus for healing, but actually make a hole in the roof to get the man into the house where Jesus was. Talk about working toward accessibility in the community of faith! This man and his friends may be as close as we can get to understanding our roles in the healing work of Jesus. Some of us need to be healed, either in body or in mind or in spirit. Others of us are called to be the ones who do whatever it takes to get their friend the healing they need. Any of us could be in either group at any time. In just a few minutes we will be ordaining Beth Campbell as a deacon in our church, someone who is particularly entrusted with the ministry of caring and healing. A big part of her job and the job of the other deacons is helping people get to a place where Jesus can heal them. Sometimes that means driving them in a car, but sometimes it also means just sitting with them and listening while they work through whatever is keeping them from Jesus and the healing he can give. It's not only the official deacons who have that job. It's the job of the whole community of Jesus to care for one another.

When we do that, a remarkable thing happens. And in all of these healings, it's not only the individual who is transformed, but the community who is transformed as well.

1. Positive reception by the one being healed
2. Attention to the body and its healing/transformation
3. Presence with compassion
4. Impact on and transformation of broader community
5. Clarifying identities of person being healed and Jesus
6. Transformation on multiple levels
7. Expanding categories and enlarging imagination

