

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI  
Rediscovering Jesus: Healer Jesus  
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October 23, 2022

Numbers 21:4-9; John 5:1-9

It has always been a special interest of mine to look at these healings and try to decipher some kind of pattern or repeatable action. In seminary, we would have constant arguments about what is that thing that needs to be in place for healing to happen because not everybody was healed. There were times when Jesus left the crowds and times when he would heal everyone or just a couple of people. What was the difference? What needed to be there for healing to take place?

One of my colleagues in seminary was insistent that it was a presence of humbleness. Which I answered with today's lesson. This guy doesn't seem very humble. He gives a lot of excuses on why he can't be made well. He doesn't have anybody to help him and when he tries he gets trampled on. It's kind of a snarky response to Jesus. I think Jesus deserved this kind of response because Jesus asked a snarky question.

The guy is at the pool where people go to be healed, and Jesus says "would you like to be healed" YES!!!! It's like asking me when I'm at an apple orchard would you like some apple cider ..yes that is why I'm here! I think maybe the man didn't have to be all that humble because Jesus didn't start the conversation all that great either.

Nonetheless, I think today's lesson proves humility is not the ultimate rule for healing to be ensured. There are other theories out there for what Jesus looks for in someone he is about to heal though. Usually what I hear as the thing that needs to be in place for healing is faith.

This teaching is one I think it's important for us to examine and test and challenge because this idea that having enough Faith or the right faith will guarantee to heal can cause a lot of harm. When someone has not healed the assumption becomes that the prayers or the faith surrounding the situation were not enough. The blame for the tragic situation then falls on the victim or the family and friends who prayed for their healing.

When we see a practice or doctrine causing shame and not producing the fruits of the spirit it is a clear sign that we need to examine it more closely. When I saw my assignment for the week was to look at Jesus specifically as a healer I was excited to have the opportunity to do just that. To put the "you must have faith to be healed" to the test. If it is true every healing should have a person of faith being healed.

I opened up to the gospel and stopped at every section involving healing and looked for faith. Wouldn't you know it I quickly found healing that did not fit the mold. The woman who reaches out to touch Jesus' cloak and is instantly healed of years of bleeding. Her faith is not accessed before she is healed. Okay, maybe the act of reaching out to touch Jesus' cloak is an act of faith in and of itself. Let's keep looking.

What about the centurion's servant then? There is no mention of the servant's faith just the faith of the master. Does this mean that faith that is worthy of healing can be anyone's faith? We can offer our faithfulness to others to withdraw healing from us as a source? Then we have the nine lepers who did not return to thank Jesus for their healing. Only one returns to give praise and gratitude for their health. The others are still healed even though they do not seem to have much faith. There are other healings but I think these are examples enough for us to see faith is not a prerequisite for healing.

Yet we still want healing to make sense, to be replicable, and to be something we can ensure for ourselves and our loved ones. We want to heal to make sense, just look at the story about Moses and the snake on the stick. Some scholars lean heavily toward logical explanations for all miracles. In our first

lesson, they see an ancient practice of slowing down the venom of a snake bite. Survivalists to advise staying calm and keeping the wound below one's heart to slow the spread of the venom. Having the bronze snake on the pole could be a way Moses encouraged people to stay calm and upright when they are bitten by a snake.

That is a possibility, we don't know for sure, but some of us are a little more comfortable with mysticism being part of our faith story. Us who don't need everything to be completely logical are also the ones who get the most hurt by a doctrine that say "faith is necessary for healing." We know that magic has rules, for example, true love's kiss solves everything in our fairytales, and so we are more apt to believe that there is a standing rule for the "magic" of healing as well.

Unfortunately, healing is complicated, like everything in life and faith. I tried to sort through all the different healing scenarios and find the "true love kiss" equivalent to who Jesus chooses to heal. I found no pattern. What I did find is that even Jesus has a complicated relationship with healing. Reading through his ministry from healing to healing a reluctant healer narrative emerged.

At first, Jesus is carefree about healing. Huge crowds are all healed at once. People who have been ill since birth are healed. These extravagant moments draw a lot of attention which is good to get the word out about Jesus as he begins his ministry. Unfortunately, the healing becomes a bit of a sideshow as Jesus travels around. The crowds show up simply to see the healing trick and the message of the ministry gets overwhelmed. Jesus begins to hold back healing and focuses more on teaching and building relationships.

But, Jesus is a healer and so he can't help himself for long. Sneaking away from the crowds clamoring for healing turns into private healing. Jesus even begins to tell those being healed NOT to tell anyone. Even in these selective healing encounters faith is still not always part of the equation. The religious leaders notice that Jesus is becoming more reluctant to do public healings so they try to trap him with healing on the Sabbath. This launches Jesus into what I named his "healing with a lesson" phase. The healings from this point on all come with a lesson attached. Jesus heals outsiders, Jesus heals from a distance, Jesus gets others involved with healing, and Jesus approves of people healing using his name.

The way Jesus heals and the adjustments he makes have more to do with how the crowd is responding rather than any hard and fast rule that would make someone worthy or not worthy of healing. Further convincing me that healing is complicated. We aren't going to find a guaranteed path to healing. Healing is more than physical, it is more than the hurts we are currently aware of, and it is more than a quick-fix miracle. True healing is not something I think we can get our human brains to grasp.

I wish I could have come here today with more but I think at the end of the day knowing that Jesus IS a healer has to be enough. Knowing that it is a trait of his ministry and practice he fully embraces and loves to do is what we can hold on to. The healing that Jesus brings is more than we even know we need or can fathom possible.

My favorite poem of all time about Jesus as a healer is called "The Ragman" By Walter Wangerin, Jr. (Here is a link to a reading of the poem as well <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6paKdR9dIE>)

These words express the impossible truth of Jesus as a healer. These words have helped ground me again when my logical mind gets too focused on the details. These words have reassured me when the impossible seemed to be the only way forward. I will read this poem to you now and then let us all sit with the meditation song as we consider what healing Jesus is working for us.

Ragman by Walter Wangerin, Jr.

I saw a strange sight. I stumbled upon a story most strange, like nothing in my life, my street sense, my sly tongue had ever prepared me for. Hush, child. hush now, and I will tell to you.

Even before the dawn one Friday morning I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking the alleys of our City. He was pulling an old cart filled with clothes both bright and new, and he was calling in a clear tenor voice: 'Rags! Ah, the air was foul and the first light filthy to be crossed by such sweet music.

'Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!'

'Now this is a wonder,' I thought to myself, for the man stood six-feet-four, and his arms were like tree limbs, hard and muscular, and his eyes flashed intelligence. Could he find no better job than this, to be a ragman in the inner city?

I followed him. My curiosity drove me. And I wasn't disappointed.

Soon the ragman saw a woman sitting on her back porch. She was sobbing into a handkerchief, signing, and shedding a thousand tears. Her knees and elbows made a sad X. Her shoulders shook. Her heart was breaking.

The Ragman stopped his cart. Quietly, he walked to the woman, stepping round tin cans, dead toys, and Pampers.

'Give me your rag,' he said gently. 'and I'll give you another.'

He slipped the handkerchief from her eyes. She looked up, and he laid across her palm a linen cloth so clean and new that it shined. She blinked from the gift to the giver.

Then, as he began to pull his cart again, the Ragman did a strange thing: he put her stained handkerchief to his own face; and then he began to weep, to sob as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet she was left without a tear.

'This is a wonder,' I breathed to myself, and I followed the sobbing Ragman like a child who cannot turn away from mystery.

'Rags! Rags! New Rags for old!'

In a little while, when the sky showed grey behind the rooftops and I could see the shredded curtains hanging out black windows, the Ragman came upon a girl whose head was wrapped in a bandage, whose eyes were empty. Blood soaked her bandage. A single line of blood ran down her cheek.

Now the tall Ragman looked upon this child with pity, and he drew a lovely yellow bonnet from his cart.

'Give me your rag,' he said, tracing his own line on her cheek, 'and I'll give you mine.'

The child could only gaze at him while he loosened the bandage, removed it, and tied it to his own head. The bonnet he set on hers. And I gasped at what I saw: for with the bandage went the wound! Against his brow it ran a darker, more substantial blood -- his own!

'Rags! Rags! I take old rags!' cried the sobbing, bleeding, strong, intelligent Ragman.

The sun hurt both the sky, now, and my eyes; the Ragman seemed more and more to hurry.

'Are you going to work?' he asked a man who leaned against a telephone pole. The man shook his head. The Ragman pressed him: 'Do you have a job?'

'Are you crazy?' sneered the other. He pulled away from the pole, revealing the right sleeve of his jacket -- flat, the cuff stuffed into the pocket. He had no arm.

'So,' said the Ragman. 'Give me your jacket, and I'll give you mine.'

So much quiet authority in his voice!

The one-armed man took off his jacket. So did the Ragman -- and I trembled at what I saw: for the Ragman's arm stayed in its sleeve, and when the other put it on, he had two good arms, thick as tree limbs; but the Ragman had only one.

'Go to work,' he said.

After that he found a drunk, lying unconscious beneath an army blanket, an old man, hunched, wizened, and sick. He took that blanket and wrapped it round himself, but for the drunk he left new clothes.

And now I had to run to keep up with the Ragman. Though he was weeping uncontrollably, and bleeding freely at the forehead, pulling his cart with one arm, stumbling for drunkenness, falling again and again, exhausted, old, old, and sick, yet he went with terrible speed. On spider's legs he skittered through the alleys of the City, this mile and the next, until he came to its limits, and then he rushed beyond.

I wept to see the change in this man. I hurt to see his sorrow. And yet I need to see where he was going in such haste, perhaps to know what drove him so.

The little old Ragman -- he came to a landfill. He came to the garbage pits. And I waited to help him in what he did but I hung back, hiding. He climbed a hill. With tormented labor he cleared a little space on that hill. Then he signed. He lay down. He pillowed his head on a handkerchief and a jacket. He covered his bones with an army blanket. And he died.

Oh how I cried to witness that death! I slumped in a junked car and wailed and mourned as one who has no hope -- because I had come to love the Ragman. Every other face had faded in the wonder of this man, and I cherished him; but he died. I sobbed myself to sleep.

I did not know -- how could I know? -- that I slept through Friday night and Saturday and its night too.

But then, on Sunday morning, I was wakened by a violence.

Light -- pure, hard, demanding light -- slammed against my sour face, and I blinked, and I looked, and I saw the first wonder of all. There was the Ragman, folding the blanket most carefully, a scar on his forehead, but alive! And, besides that, healthy! There was no sign of sorrow or age, and all the rags that he had gathered shined for cleanliness.

Well, then I lowered my head and, trembling for all that I had seen, I myself walked up to the Ragman. I told him my name with shame, for I was a sorry figure next to him. Then I took off all my clothes in that place, and I said to him with dear yearning in my voice: 'Dress me.'

He dressed me. My Lord, he put new rags on me, and I am a wonder beside him. The Ragman, the Ragman, the Christ!