



Weekly Study
Week 4: Healings in the Gospels
Read Mark 10:46-52

This lesson is about two things:

- 1) Healings in the three synoptic Gospels, and what they mean in the Gospels and for us;
- 2) The story of the healing of Blind Bartimaeus, found in all three synoptic gospels.

Scene 1:

I stand in the hospital room with the family, and we hold hands and pray for the woman who is gravely ill. This is a family I know well, and they are people of faith. We are bold to pray for healing, for a complete turnaround, for a cure, for God to intervene and bring this person back to physical health. When I finish the prayer, there is an awkward silence in the room, and the family members glance at one another. As I step out of the room to leave, a young man, the son of the patient, follows me to speak to me privately. He looks at me sadly.

"I am not sure if you know it, or if anyone told you, but that's not going to happen. The doctors have said that there is little more they can do."

"Oh," I said. "I'm sorry." It didn't seem the time to talk theology, so I continued with a more direct question. "I am still going to pray for your mom. What would you like me to pray for?"

He was a little stunned that I had put him on the spot. "Well... pray that she doesn't have a lot of pain, and that she doesn't suffer. And pray that she knows how much we love her."

"You don't want me to pray that she get well?"

"Ummm... no, I do. Please do. But I just wanted you to know the situation."

So I prayed with him. Standing there in the hallway, I put my hand on his shoulder and I prayed for his mother to be pain free, to have peace, and to know she is loved by both her family and by God. And I prayed that she would be healed.

Scene 2:

The hospital room looks the same, and there is a family gathered 'round the man who is ill. I am visiting this man because a member of St. Luke's, who is a close friend of the family, has asked me to. The people in this hospital room are, for the most part, unchurched, and faith has not been a part of their life journeys. They are clearly uncomfortable with me being there – a stranger coming into their intimate circle uninvited. I decide quickly not to stay long. And yet, the family radiates anguish as they watch the man struggle to breathe, and my heart breaks for them. Before I can even offer it, the patient's daughter asks:

"Will you pray for him?"

I answer, "Of course. What would you like me to pray for?"

She looks at me a bit incredulously. "Well, that he be healed. That he gets well. That he doesn't die."

"Sure. Of course." So I did. It was pretty much the same prayer I have prayed many times, that there be a turnaround, that there be healing, a cure even, and that God would intervene in some way and bring life. It was the same prayer I prayed for the woman who was a part of our church family.

These two stories illustrate what so many people feel about illness and healing. When people are really sick – life-changing or life-altering sick – they look to God. Of course most of us look to doctors and hospitals first, but when we come face to face with their limits, we turn to God. It is what human beings are prone to do when we realize there are things we just cannot control.

Let's look at a really brief overview of healings in the gospels, and see if we can catch a glimpse and get some perspective.

Of the 3,779 verses in the four gospels, 727 (19%) relate specifically to the healing of physical and mental illnesses and the resurrection of the dead (John Wimber: Power Evangelism, 1986. 59). Healing is a big deal in the New Testament. Here is how the gospel of Matthew summarizes Jesus' whole ministry:

³⁵ Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness." (Matthew 9:35)

The next two lessons will address miracles other than healings as well as Jesus' teaching in parables. But for this lesson, let's simply note the way this summary of Jesus' activity in Matthew indicates just how essential Jesus' healing ministry was. Too often, in our queasiness about the apparent supernatural in Scripture, we focus on Jesus' teaching and ethical mandates and we ignore his healing work. Jesus was a healer.

On the other hand, it is important that we not group all of these healings together, or paint them with the same brush. The healings happen in many different ways, and for many different purposes.

Sometimes, it is faith that has healed someone. Other times, the one healed has no faith, and the faith comes only as a response to the healing.

Sometimes, it is a friend's faith that comes into play.

Sometimes, the person asks to be healed; other times, no request is made.

Sometimes, Jesus touches the person; other times, there is no physical contact.

Sometimes, a connection is made between healing and forgiveness of sin; other times, no mention of sin or forgiveness is involved.

Jesus' healing ministry is diverse. R. Jeffrey Hiatt has put together a wonderful little chart that points to the various healings Jesus accomplishes in the gospels, and I have included it at the end of our material today.

Various Purposes of Gospel Healing Narratives

The various healing passages in the gospels are there for a variety of reasons. When we look beyond the healings themselves, we learn something more about how God is at work in the world.

Healings are a demonstration that Jesus is the Messiah, and that the kingdom of God is being inaugurated:

²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" ⁴Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (Matthew 11:2-6)

Healings are a direct response to people's need, a demonstration of Jesus compassion and mercy.

¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. (Matthew 14:14)

⁴⁰A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling, he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." ⁴¹Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" (Mark 1:40-41)

Healings show the availability of the kingdom of God to Gentiles and outsiders...

In Luke 7, Jesus heals the slave of a Roman Centurion. In all three synoptic gospels, Jesus casts out a legion of demons in the crazed man among the tombs in Gentile territory, across the Sea of Galilee. In Matthew 15, Jesus reluctantly heals a Canaanite woman (Gentile) who begs him for healing.

When we read stories of healing, it is important to look beyond the healings themselves to what more is going on, and the lesson Jesus is teaching both the disciples and us.

A word about casting out of demons

Since the advent of modern mental health medicine, the church has been divided regarding whether the narrative in Scripture regarding demon possession is speaking of mental illness, or whether there is something else going on. Certainly, the description of demon possession in Scripture looks very much like psychotic episodes, and as such, may very well speak about the incredible struggle with mental illness. In making this leap, it is important that we not imply that those who are mentally ill are possessed by an evil spirit, any more than any disease we fight is a manifestation of the broken world in which we live. Mental illness is simply another devastating illness that we seek to overcome.

However, the idea of being possessed by evil spirits rings true with me personally, apart from the idea of mental illness. I am not speaking of demonic possession as we might find it in movies, and have never seen or experienced such a phenomenon in the graphic way described by Scripture. But we live in a world where evil is not simply something "out there," but lives in human hearts, even yours and mine. The notion of demons makes evil personal for me. I have some demons of my own, ones I can even call by

name (greed... ambition... lust... arrogance...). There are days I can feel them take me over, and I pray regularly that they would be cast out of me by a God of love and deliverance.

Some observations about healing

- 1) It is God's work to be in the business of healing. God is a God of healing. The overall purpose of the healing stories is to demonstrate the love and compassion of God toward God's children: you and me and everyone.
- 2) Healing is not only physical, but holistic, and is often tied to the spiritual and social in Scripture. Healing is often connected to the forgiveness of sin. It isn't that individual sin leads to one's illness, but rather than illness is a manifestation of our broken and sinful world in general. Additionally, our illness is not confined to our physical bodies; it manifests itself mentally and socially - leading to isolation and broken spirits. So when healing takes place, it is holistic, and speaks to the whole person. Following the healings in Scripture, there is usually gratitude and a decision to follow Jesus. There is a transformation of the person that is far more than physical!

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, writes,

Health has something to do with the bridging of a gulf between flesh and spirit. And often as we look at the Gospel stories of healing, as we look at them hard and carefully, we will see how healing there emerges in a situation, whereas we look more closely at it, there is some sort of concealed alienation, some sort of bruised relationship. Much too simple to say, 'Jesus comes and heals sick people and that's wonderful and everyone is very glad.' That is very much the bottom line of the Gospel stories. But look harder and you can see how the act of healing in these contexts is, again and again, subtly connected with different kinds of isolation, different kinds of alienation. (The Theology of Health and Healing - Hildegard Lecture, Thirsk, Friday 7th February 2003)

Moreover, we can experience healing without being cured. Our spirits can be mended while we are still physically sick. Our relationships can be healed, and most of all, Jesus can heal our relationship with God, which is at the core of what it means to be made well. The word "salvation" comes from the same word as "salve" -- the Latin "salvus," meaning whole, healthy, safe.

- 3) It is the church's job to be in the business of healing in every sense of the word. Not only did Jesus heal, but he authorizes and commands his disciples to heal -- first the twelve, and then the 70. It remains our job to do so. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, churches and denominations across America founded hospitals. Certainly the people called Methodist did so, but so did Roman Catholics and Baptists and others. St. Luke's founded the Nick Finnegan counseling center as an agent of healing for relationships and to preserve mental health. As followers of Jesus, we seek to address the holistic healing of all people -- body, mind, spirit, relationship. He did it, so we will too.
- 4) We too often become enamored with supernatural healing. Although I have never experienced it personally, I do believe that God heals in ways we don't yet understand. I find it interesting that people say that miraculous healings have ceased since the days of the Bible. I see such miracles happening every day in the Medical Center ten minutes from here. I believe God uses antibiotics and surgeries, chemotherapy and conversation, prayers and petitions... all are God's tools to heal mind body and spirit. All healing, whether we understand the natural processes by which it happens or not, is something that comes from God.

- 5) Healing does not come on our terms. I prayed that my grandchild would be healed of her developmental delays. And God whispered in my ear “she is perfect just as she is.” Of course, I will continue to pray that she will do and become all God intends for her to do and become, and we will do everything we can that she can grow and thrive. But that is what we all do for those we love, don’t we? And we don’t call it healing. Or maybe we should call it healing. Sometimes, we have to be very patient and wait for the healing. For all of us, there will be a time when the only way healing can happen is for God in Christ to take us to God’s self, and give us a new body. That is part of our prayer for healing, and we leave that to God.

The Story of the Healing of Bartimaeus: Mark 10:46-52

Let’s review: Jesus is doing his ministry primarily in the area around Capernaum, in Galilee, until he believes the time is right to journey to Jerusalem and the cross. The story we studied in Luke in lesson 3 was fairly late in his ministry, well into his journey to Jerusalem. This journey is even later, and he is near Jericho, almost to Jerusalem. In fact, the very next passage has Jesus in Bethany, his launching site for the Palm Sunday walk to Jerusalem.

This story happens as Jesus is traveling through Jericho in all three of the synoptic gospels. There are some slight differences: In Matthew 20:29-34, there are two blind men and neither are named. In Luke 18:35-43, there is only one blind man he is not named. In the passage in Mark we read that his name is Bartimaeus. (The word “bar” in a name always means “son of.” For example, Simon Peter is “Simon Barjonah,” meaning Simon son of Jonah, etc. This man is simply identified as “the son of Timaeus.”)

First, note that the healing begins with a cry for mercy, for compassion. As we look for healing, it is all we can do. There is no magic formula, no instructions to access God’s healing, including rules of prayer or faith. They happen out of God’s sovereign freedom. All we can do is fall before him and say “have mercy on me.” Have compassion on me, God. In this passage, such desperation is attributed to Bartimaeus as faith: “Your faith has made you well.”

Second, Jesus’ question for Bartimaeus is a profound one. “What do you want me to do for you?” Isn’t it interesting that Jesus doesn’t say “what will you do for me, Bartimaeus?” This is not a transactional relationship, where Jesus says to us, “If you worship me and follow me, I will make you well.” Instead, it is an authentic, open-ended question. I have often looked deep within myself, and asked myself the same question: What do I want Jesus to do for me? What is the deepest desire of my heart? If God could answer any prayer, what would it be?

In all three of the gospels, this story follows a conversation between James and John about which one of them will get to sit on Jesus’ right hand in the kingdom. Jesus’ retort to their debate must have been stinging: “*The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*” (Mark 10:45) As is very often the case, he follows his teaching about servanthood with a demonstration of servanthood. “What do you want me to do for you?”

I have long strained against a sort of consumer church, where people come to sit and receive. Instead, I have tried to paraphrase the question President Kennedy asked: “Ask not what Jesus can do for you, but what you can do for Jesus...” and “Ask not what your church can do for you, but what you can do for your church.” But perhaps I have been wrong. Jesus begins with “what do you want me to do for you?” “How can I serve you?” If we are, as his followers, to have the heart of Jesus, we must begin with “What do you want me to do for you?”

But you see, in this passage as well as in its parallel in the other synoptic gospels, being healed is not the end of the story. Instead, the one who is made to see becomes a follower of Jesus. His response to the transformation Jesus offers is to become a servant himself.

It is, of course, the heart of what a relationship of love is all about. For example, what makes a marriage thrive is both partners asking, “What do you want me to do for you?” Our love relationship with Jesus begins with Jesus asking what he can do for us. “Have mercy on me. Heal me.” And then he follows through, demonstrating that saving and healing love on the cross. Our response to that amazing love is to ask him the same question in return. That is what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We love because God first loved us.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

- 1) Take a look at the chart of the healings in Jesus’ ministry on the next page. Read two or three and discuss what Jesus might be trying to teach or demonstrate through those healings, other than simply “God heals.”
- 2) Have you ever prayed for someone’s healing? What did you expect to happen as you prayed?
- 3) Do you think God heals supernaturally today? Why or why not?
- 4) What do you think is the most important thing the healings we read about in Scripture say to us about being a Christian today?
- 5) What do you think the tie is between spiritual, social, emotional, and physical health?
- 6) How do you think that Christians can be more involved in the healing work of God today?

An Overview of Jesus' Healing Ministry

From John Wesley and Healing: Developing Wesleyan Missiology, by R. Jeffrey Hiatt

| | Description | Matt. | Mark | Luke | John | |
|----|---------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|---------|------|
| 1 | Man with Unclean Spirit | | | 1:23-25 | 4:33-35 | AB |
| 2 | Peter's mother-in-law | 8:14-15 | 1:30-31 | 4:38-39 | | BCD |
| 3 | Multitudes | 8:16-17 | 1:32-34 | 4:40-41 | | ABCE |
| 4 | Many demons | | 1:39 | | | AF |
| 5 | Leper | 8:2-4 | 1:40-42 | 5:12-13 | | BCGH |
| 6 | Paralytic | 9:2-7 | 2:3-5 | 5:17-25 | | BE |
| 7 | Man with withered hand | | 12:9-13 | 3:1-5 | 6:6-10 | BG |
| 8 | Multitudes | 12:15-16 | 3:10-11 | | | A |
| 9 | Gerasenes demoniac | 8:28-32 | 5:1-13 | 8:26-33 | | AB |
| 10 | Jairus' daughter | 9:18-19; 23-25 | 5:22-24; 35-43 | 8:41-42; 59-56 | | BCE |
| 11 | Woman with issue of blood | 9:20-22 | 5:25-34 | 8:43-48 | | GI |
| 12 | A few sick people | 13:58 | 6:5-6 | | | C |
| 13 | Multitudes | 14:34-36 | 6:55-56 | | | EI |
| 14 | Syrophoenician's daughter | 15:22-28 | 7:24-30 | | | ADE |
| 15 | Deaf and dumb man | | 7:32-35 | | | BCD |
| 16 | Blind man | | 8:22-26 | | | BCD |
| 17 | Child with evil spirit | 17:14-18 | 9:14-27 | 9:38-43 | | ABCE |
| 18 | Blind Bartimaeus | 20:30-34 | 10:46-52 | 18:35-43 | | BCGH |
| 19 | Centurion's servant | 8:5-13 | | 7:2-10 | | DE |
| 20 | Two blind men | 9:27-30 | | | | BCG |
| 21 | Dumb demoniac | 9:32-33 | | | | A |
| 22 | Blind & dumb demoniac | 12:22 | 11:14 | | | A |
| 23 | Multitudes | 4:23 | 6:17-19 | | | FJ |
| 24 | Multitudes | | 9:35 | | | FJ |
| 25 | Multitudes | | 11:4-5 | 7:21 | | FJ |
| 26 | Multitudes | | 14:14 | 9:11 | 6:2 | H |
| 27 | Great multitudes | | 15:30 | | | FJ |
| 28 | Great multitudes | 19:2 | | | | |
| 29 | Blind & lame in Temple | 21:14 | | | | |
| 30 | Widow's son | | | | 7:11-15 | BH |
| 31 | Mary Magdalene & others | | 8:2 | | | A |
| 32 | Crippled woman | | 13:10-13 | | | BC |
| 33 | Man with dropsy | | 14:1-4 | | | C |
| 34 | Ten lepers | | 17:11-19 | | | BFG |
| 35 | Servant's ear | | 22:49-51 | | | B |
| 36 | Multitudes | | 5:15 | | | |
| 37 | Various persons | | 13:32 | | | A |
| 38 | Nobleman's son | | | | 4:46-53 | BE |
| 39 | Invalid | | | | 5:2-9 | BG |
| 40 | Man born blind | | | | 9:1-7 | BC |
| 41 | Lazarus | | | | 11:1-44 | B |

| | |
|----------------------|------------------------------|
| A. Drove out demons | F. Preaching of Jesus |
| B. Word spoken | G. The person's faith |
| C. Touched by Jesus | H. Jesus moved by compassion |
| D. Prayer of another | I. Person touches Jesus |
| E. Faith of another | J. Teaching of Jesus |



Daily Readings

Week 4: Healings in the Gospels

Week 4, Day 1

Mark 5:1-20

Commentary

As amazing as the physical healing of the man is, so is his social healing. His village had kicked him out. He was cut off from community. His fate was to live a cursed life isolated and alone among the tombs, without human touch or comfort or companionship, without hope of having friends. But Jesus repairs all that. Jesus brings him back into community; his healing is as social as it is physical. But is the village ready to accept him again? The man was ready for healing; what about the village? They are in need of healing, too, because they had kicked out one of their own. Jesus has come to heal our personal illnesses, yes, and the societal wounds that we inflict upon one another.

Reflection Question

Where does our society need Jesus to heal it?

Week 4, Day 2

Luke 17:11-19

Commentary

The nine are “made clean,” but the one is “made well.” What is the difference? The nine are healed of their leprosy, which is a blanket term for any skin condition that would render them ritually unclean in a Jewish town. They were untouchables, but because of Jesus they are touchable again. Their skin condition is no more, and as such they are considered clean according to Jewish laws and may live among other clean people.

But the one who comes back, he is made well because he has Jesus. The other nine can have their ritual cleanliness; this one wants Jesus. To be made well means more than physical remedy and restoration. To be made well means to return to the source of your healing. Wellness, more than cleanliness, will always require being caught up in a relationship with God, not for the sake of what you can get from God, but because it's God. Being made clean is good; being made well is best.

Reflection

Think of a time when you have experienced physical healing, and then think of time when you have been made well. What's the difference?

]Week 4, Day 3

Mark 10:46-52

Commentary

Blind Bartimaeus, sitting on the roadside with nothing else better to do, hears a large crowd coming by and he knows only two things: he's heard of this Jesus of Nazareth and his reputation of healing people like him, and he's knows exactly what he wants the most right now, not tomorrow or yesterday, *now*. In Bartimeaus we find two prerequisites for healing, first that we take Jesus at his stellar reputation, and second that we figure out what we really want, what our heart's desire really is. Bartimaeus, blind as he is, can see with crystal-clear clarity what he actually wants Jesus to do for him. Bartimaeus teaches us that healing is found where faith in Jesus and the searching of his own soul meet.

Reflection Question

What do you want Jesus to do for you today- not what you want to want, not what others say you should want, but what do you really want from Jesus?

Week 4, Day 4

Matthew 12:1-14

Commentary

Technically, Jesus breaks the law by healing on the Sabbath day. Technically, he violates the fourth of the Ten Commandments. Technically, according to Exodus 35, he should be put to death. Technically. But technically doesn't cut it for Jesus. "How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep!" If any common shepherd would break the law to save one of his sheep, then of course he should break the law to save a human being. Jesus is trying to push the Pharisees past a technical understanding of the law and toward a human understanding of the law. Jesus has not come to abolish the law but to teach us what it always really meant. The law should never get in the way of healing, because the healing of people was what the law was always supposed to accomplish.

Reflection Question

Think of a time when "religion" got in the way helping people. How your experience help religious people be better religious people?

Week 4, Day 5

Luke 5:17-26

Commentary

The scribes and Pharisees would rather the man stay paralyzed than Jesus heal him, because to heal him would mean Jesus has the authority to forgive sin, seeing that the belief system of the day said paralysis was a result of sin. They'd rather keep a faulty belief system air-tight than see the man walk. But Jesus is in the business of making men walk, not tightening up the loose screws in someone's theology. Also note that Jesus heals the paralyzed man when he sees not the man's faith but the faith of his friends. Now that's friendship, such steadfast love that Jesus would heal your friend for the sake of your loyalty to that friend. They, the friends, are the walking answers to the paralyzed man's prayers. When we pray for healing, Jesus likes to answer by sending people, by sending us.

Reflection

How can you be the answer to someone's prayer for healing today?