**Salvation as Healing**

**Co-pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**

**Nutana Park Mennonite Church, June 18, 2017**

**Scripture: Mark 2:1-12, Mark 5: 21-43**

**Hymns: HWB 367, 377, StS 44**

As a very young child – about 4 or 5 years old – I learned my father was a doctor. Like me, he has a PhD in theology, but being so young, I misunderstood what this meant. I became convinced that my father used to be a medical doctor and had quit that to become a professor of theology! My family found this very amusing.

We laugh about this kind of a mix-up, as if it’s a ludicrous comparison – I mean, who would get theology and medicine mixed up? I would venture to say that when it comes to health and healing, most of us consider ourselves rational, scientific people. We’re grateful for the Canadian healthcare system, as all of us have had to rely on it for during times of crisis and serious illness, either for ourselves or our loved ones. A number of you even rely or have relied on it for your livelihoods, working as doctors, nurses, and in other healthcare roles. We rightly see these as some of the most important professions in our society, but would we go so far as to link them with faith, or even with salvation?

Compared to our contemporary, scientific understanding of medicine, Jesus’ healing stories in the Gospels seem – well, a little strange. They might even make us uncomfortable, or feel like we don’t quite know how to interpret them. We prefer to think of Jesus as a nice teacher or preacher. Jesus the faith-healer seems a bit too distant from our worldview, a bit too “out there” – someone closer to dubious televangelists who promise that prayer alone is what’s needed for healing, that healing is always only supernatural and miraculous. This is part of the “prosperity gospel” mentality – that if you have enough faith, you’ll be “healthy and wealthy” through God’s blessing, exempt from sickness, disability or financial hardship. It amounts to the claim that if we simply have enough faith, Christians don’t get sick or suffer. [[1]](#footnote-1) But we know that’s not true.

It reminds me of the joke about the man waiting on the roof during a flood. Someone comes by in a boat and offers to give him a ride to safety. He refuses, saying, “God is going to save me.” Another boat comes by, offering him a spot, but again, he refuses, claiming that God will save him. Someone comes by in a canoe, offering to take him, and he refuses for a third time. Finally, the water rises to the point that he drowns, and when he meets God, he says, “why didn’t you save me?! I waited and waited for you!” God says, “What do you mean? I sent three boats and you refused to get in any of them!” To me, this is an analogy for God’s ways of working through people and through the world – including, healing us through health professionals and medical science.

Still, I would not want to say – as suggested by the recent provincial cuts to hospital and care home chaplaincy – that faith and healing are completely unrelated. After all, “healing” has been used for centuries as a synonym for salvation in the Bible and Christian theology for centuries – the most well-known example being the tree of life in the book of Revelation which is said to be “for the healing of the nations.” So there must be some connection between salvation and healing. We’ll have to do some digging this morning to discover the precise nature of that connection.

There are many examples of healings which Jesus performs in the Gospels, healing everyone from lepers to those possessed by demons, but this morning we’re looking at two healings, both from the Gospel of Mark. The first comes from Mark 2 and was always one of my favourite Bible stories as a child. So Jesus is in Capernaum, and it seems he’s already quite a well-known figure. We’re told that “So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them” (Mark 2:2, NRSV). But then, along come four people carrying their friend, who is paralyzed. They can’t get anywhere near Jesus because the house in which he is speaking is so packed with people. But they don’t give up. Instead, they make “a way out of no way,” to quote African American theologian Delores Williams. They start digging away at the roof of the house – which, by the way, would have been extremely disruptive to Jesus below! There he is, teaching, when suddenly strange digging noises start coming from the roof, then a bit of dust starts raining down on him, then great pieces of the roof must have crashed down as the four people made the hole, and made it big enough to lower their friend through on his mat.

And how does Jesus respond? Not with anger or even annoyance, but rather recognizing this as an act of faith. Mark states, “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’” And then after a bit of an outburst from the scribes who were present, he says, “‘stand up, take up your mat and go to your home.’ And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’” (Mark 2:5, 11-12).

It’s certainly an amazing story – but are we meant to take it literally? Bible commentators have various interpretations of the miraculous healings that are attributed to Jesus. For some, these miracles are meant to reveal that Jesus was a person of authority – including authority over nature, spirits/demons, and the body – and therefore worthy of spiritual leadership.[[2]](#footnote-2) For others, these are signs meant to invoke the faith of those who witness them. But one commentator I read called them “enacted parables” – in other words, like the parables that Jesus tells, these actions are a kind of riddle to convey to us something about what God is like, and how we are to live.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Now I found myself confused over why Jesus here seems to link the man’s paralysis with his sin, offering forgiveness and healing simultaneously, or interchangeably. Isn’t this the opposite of what Jesus says elsewhere – such as when he’s asked about whose sin made a man blind (John 9, which Patrick preached on a couple of months ago). Jesus’ response then is that sin doesn’t cause illness – the opposite of the prosperity gospel’s logic, which claims that faith = health and wealth! So what is Jesus up to here when he offers forgiveness to the paralyzed man?

One important detail to notice in this story is that the paralyzed man and his friends do not overtly seek out healing; it doesn’t actually say that at the beginning of the story. Instead, their goal is to get close to Jesus – and they’re willing to break through a roof and whatever other obstacles get in their way, just to be in the presence of Jesus![[4]](#footnote-4) Could this determination to literally break down the barriers keeping them from Jesus be what he recognizes as “their faith”? For all we know, the paralyzed man could have been suffering and felt divided from God due to some kind of guilt or mental or emotional burden, which was completely unrelated to his paralysis. If this were the case, Jesus’ offer of forgiveness alone would have been a healing act, bringing the man back into right relationship with God. This being Father’s Day, it’s striking that Jesus calls the man, “son.” Indeed, the man’s hunger for Jesus’ presence in this story is evocative of a child’s deep need for a parent’s presence. In a healthy father-child relationship, the presence of a child’s father is enough reassure them with a sense of safety and peace. This man’s desire for God’s nearness was surely similar, especially as we think of “loving Father” as one name for God.

But that is not to say that the man’s paralysis would not have been an issue within the context of first-century Palestine. In fact, people with illnesses or disabilities were restricted or even excluded from full participation in the worshipping community. As theologian Nancy Eiesland reminds us, “Leviticus 21:17-23 prohibits anyone ‘blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes’ … from the priestly activities of bringing offerings to God or entering the [inner courts, especially] the most holy place in the Temple.”[[5]](#footnote-5) If one had leprosy, one was excluded from the city altogether, and forbidden to enter its walls (Lev. 13:46).[[6]](#footnote-6) In this way, people with illnesses or disabilities were rendered “unclean” or outcasts, excluded from their communities. This is why so many of these people flock to Jesus, the teacher who treats them with dignity, as human beings. And this man who is paralyzed has also not been completely ostracized – he has his four friends who don’t cast him aside or treat him as “unclean.” They’re even willing to dig through a roof for him! Perhaps this too is what Jesus recognizes as their “faith.”

These dynamics of how the community relates to those who are ill or have disabilities also at work in our story from Mark 5, which is really two healing stories wrapped into one. At the start, we have Jesus being called to an important person’s house – Jairus, one of the leaders of the synagogue, has a daughter who is very ill. But on his way to Jairus’ house, Jesus passes through a large crowd and is interrupted by someone else – “a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years.” We’re not told what kind of illness it actually was, though we can safely assume that it was a menstrual or uterine issue. We’re simply told “She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse” (Mark 5:25-26). Now the contrast between these two “patients” of Jesus’ couldn’t be starker – the twelve-year-old girl is the daughter of an important leader in the community, while the woman has been considered “ritually unclean” and excluded from worship for the past twelve years and on top of that, has impoverished herself trying to become well. As Ched Myers writes, “the little girl had enjoyed twelve years of privilege as the daughter if a synagogue ruler’; the woman ‘had suffered twelve years of destitution.’” This kind of an illness also likely “isolated [the woman] socially from friends and kin, and placed her outside the religious community.’” [[7]](#footnote-7) So the important figure, Jairus, may have actually been quite resentful when this woman of low status dared to interrupt Jesus on his way to see his daughter.

But the woman is sort of stealthy about the interruption. Mark states, “She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.’ Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease” (Mark 5:27-29). But Jesus notices this woman’s actions: “Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, ‘Who touched my clothes?’” (v. 30). And the disciples are a little embarrassed by this question, as Jesus is shouting it out. “What are you talking about, Jesus! You’re making your way through a crowd, everyone is pressed together. What do you mean, who touched your clothes? Everybody did!” But the no-longer-bleeding woman knows what he means, and “knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth” (v. 33). She’s expecting Jesus to publicly shame her for her audacity, for daring to take healing power from him in this way, without even asking. Here again she’s at a disadvantage to Jairus’ daughter – she “has no male kinsman to plead her case” before Jesus.[[8]](#footnote-8) But Jesus is not angry with her, nor does he shame her – he does the opposite. He praises her initiative, and empowers her, saying it wasn’t even his power that healed her but her own faith! “Your faith has made you well,” he says to her. “Go in peace.” Here, like in the story of the paralyzed man, Jesus builds up someone who was formerly invisible, affirming her as a woman of faith and courage.

He also, importantly, calls her “daughter,” just as he called the paralyzed man, “son.” In this way, Jesus “claims her as family, [and] restores her to community,” becoming a father to this woman whose own father has perhaps cast her aside and broken relationship with her because of her long, unexplained illness. And as a caring father-figure, Jesus tells her to “go in peace,” meaning a very broad sense of peace or *shalom* (in Hebrew) which includes, “peace, wholeness, salvation.” This was a vision for her wholeness, safety, met needs, and right relationship with God and other people. Scholar Frances Taylor Gench concludes, “reincorporation into the community is the essence of Jesus’ healing.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

So what do these healing stories have to teach us, today, about our salvation? While we may not pray for or expect miraculous healings like the ones ascribed to Jesus, but that doesn’t mean their appeal is lost on us. They still name a deep desire in us to have God “fix” everything that’s broken in this world, to take away the very real suffering and pain and death and loss that illness can bring to us and our loved ones, family and friends. In some ways, we have transferred these expectations onto medical science, speaking of the “miracles of modern medicine,” and believing almost anything can be “fixed” or “cured.” Sara Miles, an Episcopal minister in San Francisco, writes about doctors she knows who “wind up really hating patients when they can’t cure them. They get so angry when they can’t fix things.” “But,” she says, “Jesus specifically heals people even when they aren’t cured. He doesn’t stop suffering, but promises to be with us in suffering.” We know that healing doesn’t always happen the way we want it to, no matter how much we pray. So Miles says, “Prayer can’t cure. All prayer can do is heal, because healing comes embedded in relationship, and prayer is one of the deepest forms of relationship – with God and other people. And through relationship, there can be healing in the absence of cure.”[[10]](#footnote-10) In short, God is also with us when we don’t get better.

This is how God is stronger than illness, disabilities, even death. Those things cease to be barriers to our relationship with God and with each other; as Paul writes in Romans 8:39, “Nothing can separate from the love of God.” As Jesus exemplified when he claimed outcasts as sons and daughters, for God, none of those things are barriers, none of them define us; God sees us with love and compassion, as fully human, as people of faith, as God’s beloved children. God desires our wholeness and for us to treat one another with compassion, as fully human, as family. So healing becomes not so centrally about miracles, but rather about being the presence of God with one another, especially when we are hurting, just as Jesus was to the paralyzed man, the hemorrhaging woman, and so many other people whom he restored to right relationship, wholeness, and peace – whether or not they were cured. AMEN

1. Vann R. Newkirk II, “The American Health Care Act’s Prosperity Gospel,” *The Atlantic* (May 5, 2017): https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/the-prosperity-gospel-of-american-health-care/525264/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well: Women’s Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2004), 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Achtemeyer, Green, and Meye Thomson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I first heard a similar interpretation of this story told by Chuck Neufeld, when he spoke at a Mennonite Church Manitoba gathering in 2014 or 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Achtemeyer et al., 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Quoted in: Gench, 30, 33. The latter is quoting Mary Ann Tolbert. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gench, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gench, 35, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak: Feeding, Healing, Raising the Dead* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 73, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)