

Series: The Words of Jesus—on Healing

Today: Help Our Unbelief

Text: Mark 9:14-29

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

Sunday, March 15, 2009 (Third Sunday in Lent)

First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

It is always a joy to preach to this congregation because you are such attentive listeners. You have been especially attentive in this Lenten series on the Words of Jesus on Healing, and I want to thank you for your interest. Some of you have shared with me your own stories of healing. Others are not so sure about the role of faith in 21st century medicine, but you are curious. You want to believe God heals, but you have your questions. As always, you know my sense of humor, and you have shared stories with me when you thought it appropriate, and some may yet wind up as a sermon example.

This week one of you who would fall in the “not so sure” category sent me a story about a man who goes to a revival and listens to the preacher. After a while the preacher asks anyone with needs to come forward to be prayed over. Big Ed gets in line. When it's his turn, the preacher says, "Big Ed, what do you want me to pray about?" Big Ed says, "Preacher, I need you to pray for my hearing."

So the preacher puts one finger in Big Ed's ear and the other hand on top of his head and shouts, hollers, and prays a while. After a few minutes, he removes his hands and says, "Big Ed, how's your hearing now?" Big Ed says, "I don't know preacher, it's not until next Wednesday at the Courthouse."

This morning our text deals with faith and healing. In it we find a father speaking for many of us when it comes to the miracle of healing: *Lord, I believe, help my unbelief*, but there is

more here than just those words. Here are the areas of the text I would like to deal with this morning: 1) The Request; 2) The Response; and 3) The Revelation.

THE REQUEST

The setting for this healing takes place immediately after the events which took place on Mount Hermon near the city of Caesarea Phillipi; far to the north of his home in Galilee. Jesus had climbed the mountain with three of his followers: Peter, James and John.

As Mark tells the story, Jesus was transfigured. His clothes took on a dazzling white aura, and there appeared the biblical figures of Moses and Elijah who confirmed the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. In Luke's version of the same story, which appears in each of the synoptic gospels (Matthew 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36), Peter is so caught up in the experience that he doesn't want to leave. He wants to stay on the mountaintop and build shelter for the three patriarchs of our faith, but Jesus knows that the power of what he is called to be and do is not on mountaintops. It is in the valleys of the ordinary where most of us live our lives.

So Jesus comes down from the mountain, and the first thing he encounters is a theological argument. His disciples were debating with some religious leaders about why the followers of Jesus could not bring healing to a young man who was afflicted with the symptoms of epilepsy. The religious leaders wanted to know why the disciples of Jesus were unable to perform the kind of healing miracles which Jesus was able to perform. In the midst of the debate, the father of the boy with epilepsy makes his request, and it is a request that most of us can identify with. *"If you are able, have pity on us and help us!"*

Most of us want to believe that God is still in the business of healing, but when we are honest with ourselves, we bump into the *"IF's"* which keep us from fully embracing the healing power of God as a reality in our lives. In fact, I think most of us identify more closely with the young pastor who went to pray with an older woman. She's near death; she's in the hospital lying

on the pillow, gasping for breath. He visits with her, and then he says, "I need to go, but would you like to have prayer before I go?"

The old woman says, "Yes." And the young pastor asks, "Well, what would you like us to pray for today?" And she says, "I'd like to pray I'd be healed, of course."

The young pastor gasps but goes on, "Lord, we pray for your sustaining presence with this sick sister. And if it be thy will, we pray that she will be restored to health and to service. But if it's not thy will, we certainly hope that she will adjust to her circumstances."

Suddenly the old woman opens her eyes and sits up in bed. She throws her feet over the side of the bed. She stands up. She says, "I think I'm healed!" And she strides out the door. The last the pastor sees, she's striding down the hall toward the nurses' station, saying "Look! Look at me! I'm healed!"

The young pastor can't believe what he has just seen. He goes down the steps, goes out to the parking lot. Before he opens the door of his car, he looks up and says, "Don't you ever do that to me again!"

"If you are able, have pity on us and help us." This is the father's request, and it sounds kind of like the requests we make, doesn't it? We would like to believe that God still heals, that Christ still cares, but we aren't 100% sure. Perhaps we are afraid of being disappointed. I mean, what happens to all those requests which are made that go unanswered, or at least not answered the way we might like them to be answered. What do we do with the petitions we offer on behalf of those we love when the answer we want to hear is not the answer we get?

THE RESPONSE

This leads us to the response of Jesus. He confronts the father. *"If you are able! All things can be done for the one who believes."* Do you notice that he does not tell the father, *"I will take care of this."* He makes it clear that faith and healing are intertwined with each other.

The level of the father's willingness to believe in the healing mercies of God will make a difference in what Jesus is able to do. And the father responds, "*Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.*"

Several years ago I told you of an experience I had in the first year of my career as a pastor, nearly 38 years ago now. Early in the morning, before the sun was up, I was called to the home of one of our young families to baptize their baby who had been found dead in his crib. Seminary does not prepare one for moments like these. All the reformed theology about baptism goes out the window when faced with a dead baby and grieving parents. I knew little Matthew did not need baptism to be embraced by the love of God, but his parents needed it, and so we baptized this little dead child using water from the sink and praying for God to receive him in tender mercy to the place that was prepared for him before the beginning of time.

I stayed with the family until the funeral director came and claimed the body, and then all day long I continued to stop by the house about every two hours just to check in. On one of my visits I found Chris, the father of the dead child, in his back yard pacing back and forth and saying over and over again, "*A father shouldn't have to bury a son. A father shouldn't have to bury a son.*" What does one say to comfort someone in that kind of grief? As far as I was concerned, he was right. A father shouldn't have to bury a son.

The pain in my own heart was palpable, and I went to the one who has understood my pain for 39 years. I found my wife, Cherie, and asked her to come home with me; that I needed to talk. I told her the question Chris was asking. I knew I would be preaching at little Matthew's funeral in just two days. What could I say that would be of comfort?

Cherie listened, held me, allowed me to cry, and comforted me. And then she said, "*Maybe the only thing you can say is that God understands exactly what Chris is going through because God had to bury His son.*"

And so just nine months out of seminary, that is what I preached. I told Chris and Harriet that God understood what they were going through and would meet them at the point of their need because He had buried a son, too. I spoke to them of the love of God and the compassion of the congregation I was serving at that time. I told them that I wasn't sure how, but that we would get through this together. We believed what we could, and we asked God to meet us at the point of our unbelief.

The grief didn't end with that service. It was really only the beginning of working things through. It was painful, and it was complicated. Their marriage did not survive, but they did, and today they use their pain to help others who have lost a child to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Somehow knowing that we didn't have to figure it all out and could trust God to understand if we were willing to take the first step in the process seemed to be enough.

THE REVELATION

Finally, there is the revelation. The disciples were now asking Jesus the same question that had been asked of them by the religious leaders. They asked Jesus why they could not do what he was able to do. The answer Jesus gave was not very comforting. He said that this kind of healing requires prayer, and some translations include fasting.

I have wondered all week what that means. Doesn't all healing require prayer? What made this one any different than the others? Then, when I read it last night after seeking help from other commentaries, I believe he was telling them that they were not yet spiritually mature enough.

Jesus seems to take evil very seriously. He recognizes that what he is dealing with is more than just a physical disease. Before the disciples can be healers, they must first be healed themselves. Before they can do what Jesus does, they must work on the broken places in their own lives. They haven't prayed enough. Some manuscripts add fasting to this discipline. They

must be healed from the inside out themselves if they want to help others heal from the inside out.

Like most of you, I have been struggling to make some sense out of the chaotic world we are currently living in. My investments have fallen just like yours, and I am wondering if before we can get well we must address the soul sickness which has contributed to this current economic crisis. Before we can address the sickness in our economy, we have to address the sickness in ourselves which has contributed to the meltdown we have experienced. Unless we are willing to look at greed and the lust for personal power in ourselves, how we will be able to root it out of our economic structure?

During the week in which global stock markets declined by \$7 trillion, Philip Yancey received a call from an editor at Time magazine. The editor's question was simple: "How should a person pray during a crisis like this?" This is what Yancey shared in response:

The first stage is simple, an instinctive cry: "Help!" For someone who faces a job cut or health crisis or watches retirement savings wither away, prayer offers a way to voice fear and anxiety. I have learned to resist the tendency to edit my prayers so that they sound sophisticated and mature. I believe God wants us to come exactly as we are, no matter how childlike we may feel. A God aware of every sparrow that falls surely knows the impact of scary financial times on frail human beings. ...

If I pray with the intent to listen as well as talk, I can enter into a second stage, that of meditation and reflection. Okay, my life savings has virtually disappeared. What can I learn from this seeming catastrophe?.... A time of crisis presents a good opportunity to identify the foundation on which I construct my life. If I place my ultimate trust in financial security or in the government's ability to solve my problems, I will surely watch the basement flood and the walls crumble.

A friend from Chicago, Bill Leslie, used to say that the Bible asks three main questions about money: (1) How did you get it? (Legally and justly or exploitatively?); (2) What are you doing with it? (Indulging in luxuries or helping the needy?); and (3) What is it doing to you? Some of Jesus' most trenchant parables and sayings go straight to the heart of that last question.

The same week that global wealth shrank by \$7 trillion, Zimbabwe's inflation rate hit a record 231 million percent. In other words, if you had saved \$1 million Zimbabwean dollars by Monday, on Tuesday it was worth \$158. This sobering fact leads me to the third and most difficult stage of prayer in crisis: I need God's help in taking my eyes off my own problems in order to look with compassion on the truly desperate. ...

What a testimony it would be if, in 2009, Christians resolved to increase their giving to build houses for the poor, combat AIDS in Africa, and announce kingdom values to a decadent, celebrity-driven culture. Such a response defies all logic and common sense — unless, of course, we take following Jesus seriously. (Condensed from Christianity Today, © 2009)

CONCLUSION

Healing and faith has been our focus for today.

- The request: *If you are able...* Do we believe God longs for wholeness and health?
- The response: *Lord, I believe, help my unbelief...* Are we willing to trust that God understands our circumstance and will walk with us even in the difficult and dark places of our lives?
- The revelation: *Why can't we do what Jesus did?* Because we are not spiritually mature enough and we need to heal ourselves before we can heal others.