

Healing

John Wilkinson
Third Presbyterian Church
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Mark 5:21-43

Almighty God, who hast given us this good land for our heritage: we humbly beseech Thee that we may always prove ourselves a people mindful of Thy favor and glad to do Thy will.

Bless our land with honorable industry, sound learning and pure manners. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion; from pride and arrogancy; and from every evil way. Defend our liberties, and fashion into one happy family the multitudes brought hither out of many kindreds and tongues.

Endue with the spirit of wisdom those to whom in Thy name we entrust the authority of government, that there may be justice and peace at home, and that, through obedience to Thy law, we may show forth Thy praise among the nations of the earth.

In the time of prosperity fill our hearts with thankfulness and in the day of trouble suffer not our trust in Thee to fail. Amen.

Prayer for Independence Day

Book of Common Worship

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1946

For a reason too convoluted to explain now, I found myself talking about the health care system in Zanesville, Ohio just a few days ago. Memories flooded back. We had two hospitals – a Catholic one called Good Samaritan and a non-Catholic/Protestant/“other” one called Bethesda. Nuns founded Good Sam, and Presbyterians founded Bethesda, but by the time we moved there, those distinctions had largely – though not entirely – faded away. My dad visited church members in both hospitals.

Some 20 years ago, I learned, the hospitals merged, as they are doing across the country, for all of the reasons we know so well. The new name? Genesis. If you are going to name a hospital after a book of the Bible, I guess Genesis is better than Exodus, or Lamentations.

I remember my dad leaving the house, or coming back from a visit, and it was not until years later that I gave much thought to what he did. Our kids had the same experience here: seeing me head to, or arrive home from Strong, or RGH, or, briefly, Genesee, or Park Ridge which was later Unity and is now RGH Unity and which likely will become something else.

At Third Church, we learn that someone is in the hospital, or had a surgery planned. At times, we are encouraged not to visit – it's too much bother, we hear, or I won't be in very long. My standard practice is to ignore that request. It's never a bother, and any hospital stay matters, and in general, people are glad to see us when we show up.

I used to ask people if they wanted a prayer, seeking to be sensitive. Now, almost always, I just pray, even briefly, and despite any initial reluctance or hesitancy, people are grateful that I did. I am sure you understand.

In my dad's last year at the church in Zanesville, he presided at some 50 funerals or memorial services, funerals, mostly, with the casket present. 50. That means that many of the people he visited at Bethesda and Good Sam died, then, or soon thereafter. The same happens now, some 20 or 25 memorial services at Third Church annually, one just a day or so ago.

And yet we continue to show up – not just the ministers, but our Deacons, and all of you – show up to visit, to hold a hand, to commiserate about hospital food, to watch TV at the bedside, to pray. We show up, not to engineer a result, a healing, but for deeper reasons than that.

Yes, we know that some people will heal, and recover. Many visits these days are for hip and knee replacements, what I call a 21st century tune-up to get people back on track. Or other kinds of procedures that fix things that can be fixed. But there are other realities – cancer, dementia, heart disease, the natural journey of aging, for which death is the destination.

And yet we continue to show up. The point is not praying an eloquent prayer, or a fervent prayer, in order to effectuate a miraculous healing, to have the surgery go better than it otherwise would have, to make the chemo work *just this one* time, to hope the surgeon has a particularly good day. That's not how it works.

Chemo works, and it doesn't. Hearts mend, and they fail. Bodies heal, and they don't. We know that. Yet we continue to show up.

A synagogue leader showed up. His name was Jairus. His daughter was sick, sick to the point of death. And he sought Jesus out, a desperate, loving father, searching for healing. "Come and lay

your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.” And Jesus agreed. That is worth noting. The crowd followed.

But as we have heard, before he got to the girl, something else happened. A woman, who had been suffering from menstrual hemorrhages for twelve years – experiencing not only physical pain but, we presume, social and religious hardship, who had endured much under many physicians, who had spent all that she had, who sought healing but experienced none, heard about Jesus. Like Jairus, she was desperate, though she had no standing to speak to Jesus, let alone invite him to heal her. So in the anonymous crowd, she reached out and touched Jesus’ clothing. She was healed; she stopped bleeding.

And somehow, Jesus knew. He sensed an exchange of power. He looked around, inquiring, and the woman confessed. Rather than retribution, he told her that her faith had made her well.

Meanwhile, Jairus receives a report that his daughter has died. Jesus corrects their perception of the situation. “Do not fear, only believe.” Much description follows. The bottom line is that even though they laughed at him, Jesus took the daughter by the hand and told her to get up, and she did. Then two things – amazement, and a pledge to secrecy.

We do so many things with these stories of Jesus and healing. Many of the things are wrong, wrong not in the sense of misplaced faith, of course, not wrong because we know and love people – we’ve *been* people – desperate for healing, as desperate as a concerned father and a bleeding woman, not wrong, even, because we’ve sought Jesus out. We don’t know the true nature of their afflictions, and I don’t want, ever, to discount unexplained and unexpected, miraculous, even, healing.

But we know different and better and deeper than that. Chemo works, and it doesn’t. Hearts mend, and they fail. Bodies heal, and they don’t. Bleeding stops, and it doesn’t. Daughters live, and they die.

What are we to make of this? Like many things, we leave it to mystery, and interpretation. Yet here are some possibilities.

It is about *determination*. A father’s. A woman’s. Of the woman, Mark Davis writes: “She is as defined by her determination as by her suffering. After all that she suffered and did, she grabbed his garment.”

It is about *presence*. Jesus showed up. We show up. Brian Volcker writes: “The encounter is far more important than the cure, or perhaps it is better to say that the cure is the outward sign of an inward transformation.”

It is about *touch*. The woman touched Jesus. Jesus touched the little girl. Both were taboo in Jewish law, touching a woman who was menstruating and touching a dead body. Yet not only did Jesus defy convention, he did so at the most elemental human level. A hug, an embrace. A hand held.

Alyce McKenzie writes: "'Though we are not called to go around curing people's symptoms and raising them from physical death, we are called to seek Jesus' touch.'

Rick Morley writes: "Until we are either touched by Jesus, or reach out and touch Jesus ourselves, then—and only then—are we delivered from death and given the sacred gift of life."

Minister and writer Frederick Buechner writes eloquently about this passage:

"The question is what kind of a story is it? If the little girl had actually died the way the people who were there in the house believed she had, then it is the story of a miracle as dazzling as the raising of Lazarus and bears witness to the power Jesus had over even the last and darkest power of all. If she was only sleeping as Jesus said—in a coma or whatever he may have meant - then it is a story about a healing, about the power of Jesus's touch to make the blind see and the deaf hear and the lame walk. Either way it is a story about a miracle, but about a miracle that doesn't end with an exclamation point the way you would expect, but with a question mark or at most with the little row of dots that means unresolved, to be continued, to figure out somehow for ourselves.

Who can say for sure exactly what it is that Jesus did in that house where Jairus lived or how far down into the darkness he had to reach to do it, but in a way who cares any more than her mother and father can have cared. They had their child back. She was alive again. She was well again. That was all that mattered.

Who knows what kind of story Mark is telling here, but the enormously moving part of it, I think, is the part where Jesus takes the little girl's hand and says, "*Talitha cum*"—'Little girl, get up'—and suddenly we ourselves are the little girl.

It is that life-giving power that is at the heart of this shadowy story about Jairus and the daughter he loved, and that I believe is at the heart of all our stories—the power of new life, new hope, new being, that whether we know it or not, I think, keeps us coming...in search of it. It is the power to get up even when getting up isn't all that easy for us anymore and to keep getting up and going on and on toward whatever it is, whoever he is, that all our lives long reaches out to take us by the hand. ("Jairus' Daughter" in *Secrets in the Dark*)"

So we continue to show up, with determination, with hope, seeking his presence, somehow. We show up believing in something deeper than magic, hoping for a cure but trusting in something more powerful, more powerful than death. Whatever healing looks like, whatever healing is, it is this, reflected in risk and hope, in defying convention, in trust, in touch. That community

surrounds us, that we are called and empowered to be that community, that Jesus welcomes us, that Jesus knows our name, that's the miracle. Amen.