
Lent: a Season of Healing
Martin Grove United Church
February 21, 2016
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Based on Matthew 15:21-28

Well - it's hard to know where to start. Was I the only one offended by our gospel story today? Jesus - our hero - is walking along. The first thing he does is ignore a woman in distress. Then, when he finally condescends to speak with her, he compares her to a dog. And what was the reason that Jesus gave for his actions? He told the woman that she was not one of "his people". During this somewhat disturbing story, Jesus is exposed as a racist. Is that really how this story goes? What is going on here?

Generally, people who don't like this story have 3 problems with it. In the first place, Jesus refuses to help the woman in need. In the second place, Jesus refers to the woman as a dog. And in the third place, Jesus changes his mind and cures the girl anyway. Is this really the Jesus that know, and love, and sing songs about?

Many scholars and others have tried to find other ways to read this story that feel less disturbing. Some suggest that Jesus was on a vacation, and that he wasn't really "working" that day. Some suggest that Jesus was on a mission to go somewhere else, and simply did not have time for the woman. Some suggest that Jesus was - in fact - as a product of his time - racist - or to be fair, racist by our standards today.

In spite of that, this story is definitely one of my favourite gospel stories. But for me, the most meaningful way to read this story is NOT to try to justify Jesus using a lot of politically correct language to try to explain Jesus's behaviour. To my mind, that sort of wordsmithing involves too much violence to the text. Instead - let's begin by asking what this story is about. What is this story is about to you?

[what is this story about - healing? cure?]

In my tradition, one of the Sunday services during Lent should be about healing,

because healing is part of the Lenten journey. But if I invited you to a “healing service”, what image pops into your mind? In some churches, a healing service involves the minister jumping around, lots of yelling, and great music. And of course, people coming to the service on crutches and throwing them away with abandon during the service because they don't need them anymore. Well, those services *are* a part of my own past. When I was a teenager, I participated for about 5 years in a Christian community that Benny Hinn was also a part of. Today, Benny Hinn is an internationally acclaimed faith healer. He was quite low-key back then. I remember he would do a healing in that community perhaps a couple of times a year, and always on a small scale. But now he is big-time big-league. Benny was in Manado, Indonesia recently, and he held a crusade attended by 200,000 people.

I could feel jealous that Benny has moved on to bigger things. By actually, I am quite content that he has moved on to bigger things while I have moved on to better things - in my mind at least. Because Benny - even though he is called a “healer”, is in fact famous for “curing” people. He does not heal them. And I have discovered that I am much more interested in healing than in cure. But what’s the difference really?

Cure has to do - ultimately - with destruction. Cure has to do with destroying something, like a cancer or a virus. Cure means going back to whatever state we were in before we got sick in the first place. And of course, it is very natural that if we get sick, we often want a cure. Cure can be good. But cure separates our body from our soul. Cure looks at what sort of disease we have. It categorizes. It isolates. It individualizes.

Healing really isn’t the same thing at all. Healing is a process that embraces the whole. Healing has to do with accepting a situation as part of our lives - whether we are seeking a cure or not. Healing does not look at disease in an isolated way; healing looks at what sort of person has the disease. Healing fosters connectivity. Healing fosters purpose. Healing offers what might be.

And perhaps that’s the biggest distinction. Cure changes what is in an attempt to reclaim what was in the past. Healing - on the other hand - offers a new vision of what might be. Cure is about going back to a former reality. Healing is about moving forward

to a new reality. And that's why healing is part of the Lenten journey. It's also why I am so passionate about healing.

As you may know, for 6 years I visited weekly with inmates at the Toronto West Detention Centre. I want to share a story with you of one person I visited with because his story touches on cure, healing, and faith.

I'll call the person Tom. Tom had spent much of his life - and most of his adult life - in prison. He told me that he has a long list of convictions for both theft and various forms of assault. Or - to put it in Tom's words - he's hurt a lot of people and he's stolen from a lot of people. But a few years ago, during one of his stays in prison, he came to realize that his life was a mess, and he started to imagine a life not centred on crime. And while he was starting to think along those lines, he started meeting the prison chaplain. And in a way that is a cliché of prison stories, Tom gave his life to Jesus and became a Christian in prison.

Now Tom had been told that when he was saved by Jesus, he would feel washed by the Holy Spirit, and feel like a new man. And he did! Tom felt the cure and forgiveness of the spirit. But Tom also thinks he was told that "real" Christians do not sin any more. And so Tom expected that after his spiritual baptism (which he experienced in a dramatic and very real way), that he would stop breaking the law. Tom expected that his faith would prevent him from committing further crimes, and that therefore, his new faith would automatically create in him the new life that he wanted.

Well - by the time that I first visited with Tom, he had realized that it *didn't quite* work that way. Tom still felt a great deal of temptation in his heart, and that temptation led - quite naturally - to Tom continuing to commit crimes. Which is how it came to be that I had the opportunity to visit with him. Tom had 3 options. He could blame the chaplain for lying to him. He could blame Jesus for not coming through. Or he could blame himself for not having enough faith. And of course, he blamed himself.

And how often do we do that ourselves? How often do we blame our own lack of faith for the messes that we get into? How often do we imagine that our faith is inadequate because we don't have the lives that we want? How often do we think our

faith is inadequate because we don't feel a certain way? That happens all too easily when we look for cure, when what we really need is healing.

Healing is often defined as finding wholeness. And wholeness can only be found by integrating all of the various aspects of our lives together. In Tom's case, this means integrating his desires and temptations into his image of himself - instead of expecting Jesus to simply take those aspects of his character away. And for each of us - in what aspects of our own life are we resisting healing, refusing to accept, refusing to integrate - into our own authentic God-given selves?

In our gospel story, we see both cure and healing at work, but not to the same person. The woman's daughter is cured. And Jesus opens himself to healing. The daughter is cured of her evil spirits, and Jesus is healed - or at least his healing had started - from his racist attitude. And in the story - as in real life - cure can sometimes happen fairly quickly, but healing is a process that happens over time.

What might cure look like here? For us? If "cure" means going back to a former state, then perhaps "cure" would mean having this church full of younger people again, regaining our lost social status, feeling like we are again the dominant group in our society. I'm pretty sure that's not going to happen.

But what about healing? What might healing look like here? What would it mean to open ourselves to healing? What would it mean to embrace our own wholeness? What would it mean to embrace our present situation and to accept it simply as who we now are instead of comparing ourselves to an image from our past? What would it mean to simply accept that we have been faithful to God, and that we are still being faithful to God - because we are! And to move forward from there - sorry - I mean to move forward from here!

This time. This place. This situation. It's all a gift from God. Embrace the gift. Be open to healing.

Amen.