

Healing within Healing

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Reading:

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag.

David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan. (He ordered that The Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah; it is written in the Book of Jashar.) He said:

Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places!

How the mighty have fallen!

Tell it not in Gath,

proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon;

or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice,

the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult.

You mountains of Gilboa,

let there be no dew or rain upon you,

nor bounteous fields!

For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,

the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more.

From the blood of the slain,

from the fat of the mighty,

the bow of Jonathan did not turn back,

nor the sword of Saul return empty.

Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!

In life and in death they were not divided;

they were swifter than eagles,
they were stronger than lions.

O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,
who clothed you with crimson, in luxury,
who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.

How the mighty have fallen
in the midst of the battle!

Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.
I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
greatly beloved were you to me;
your love to me was wonderful,
passing the love of women.

How the mighty have fallen,
and the weapons of war perished!

Mark 5.21 – 43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.' So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. 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 haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd

pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?" ' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?' But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.' He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

The lectionary today brings us to a very famous passage about two miraculous healings performed by Jesus. The author's craft in embedding the one story within the other allows us to experience the connection between the little girl on the verge of womanhood and the woman on the verge of old age, even though they are strangers to one another.

These healing stories are often hard to hear. In the first place, they make it so obvious that the Bible is talking about a time and place and sensibility – a whole world – that is almost impossibly remote from ours. When would we see a prominent citizen throw herself at the feet of a small town preacher and beg for his daughter to be healed? Or a woman whose medical condition rendered her not only discouraged and broke, (we have that too), but made it unlawful for her to go out in public? The Bible is really very exotic, and we always need to keep that in mind. The original readers of this ancient text probably didn't find it surprising or problematic that such healings as these could occur. As far as we know, the stories were received at face value as wondrous and believable signs of Jesus' greatness. But it's harder for us.

Healing stories are hard to hear also because they make us long for healing, and wonder about healing. There are so many ways in which human beings are fragile. We are vulnerable both outwardly and inwardly. Like other creatures, we are subject to disease and weather, to war and famine and violence. Even apart from catastrophe, human life is short, and depends upon the well-being of both bio-physical and social communities in which we live. The human man and woman or child is a mortal, a being that can be harmed, can fall sick, can suffer. At some time, in some way, everyone needs healing.

We know from our own lives that some are healed of illness and affliction, and some are not. In reality, some people get better, and some people receive the spiritual strength to endure their burden with equanimity and some people just go on suffering. The unfairness of life raises the question of the fairness of God. That's a *hard* question.

A third way in which healing stories are difficult to hear is that they make us think of what we may know of contemporary faith healing ministries. We've seen them on TV or perhaps in person. And we may have visited great present-day healing centres at Lourdes or Fatima or St. Joseph's oratory in Montreal. For some it is disturbing to see the dynamic and even rushed approach of the great personalities – as if the healer were a big battery doling out jolts of the Holy Spirit. Sort of a divine jumper-cable. And that doesn't seem right.

And yet no doubt we have also wondered wistfully, as we gaze at piles of abandoned crutches and braces, and walls covered with insignias of gratitude. It seems there *must* be something bigger than we know, and more mysterious, that actually does somehow break through into this vale of tears, in ways we cannot fathom.

So for all these reasons and with all these thoughts, we may find there is a deep layer of debris to be dug through and cleared away before we can take a front row seat at this beautifully crafted tale of two healings.

The power flows in the story are interesting – it's hard to keep track of who is up and who is down. The dominant mainstream Jairus falls at the feet of the very offbeat Jesus. The entirely marginal bleeding woman pushes through to the centre of the crowd around the Lord of Life, and takes the initiative to touch his clothing. Jesus, now clearly shown as miraculously powerful, then stops. Interrupts the task he is performing for the powerful man's child, in order to address this nobody as daughter, and to praise her faith. We sense that he bends to her as he speaks words that launch two thousand years of theological puzzling – it is your *faith* that made you whole. Not me.

As he then hurries on his way to the house of Jairus, a place where he might find a good backup useful, Jesus excludes everyone except the inner circle, Peter, James and John. Then another theological zinger – *the opposite of fear is not courage but faith*. At the house, when he claims the girl will live, he is confronted by derision, even though he is arriving fresh from a very public healing, so you'd think they might have some confidence. And then at the moment of climax, as the girl arises, instead of theology or proclamation, Jesus makes a practical request for food, and adds an injunction to keep quiet about what has happened.

Funny story. When we try to follow the plot, and understand how the power of God and the power of humanity interact, it's like watching a pinball machine. The mirror-finished ball in play veers off in unexpected ways, up and down the playfield in response now to gravity, now to the touch of a flipper, and then bounces off the elastic siding. You can almost hear the rolling and the beeping and the 'pings' as points are scored.

But note the overall pattern of the story: at the beginning there are two sites of ill-health, where things have become disordered. Oddly, the older woman has been ill exactly as long as the girl has been alive. Twelve years. The girl is on the brink of womanhood, about to launch into full vigor and beauty and fruitfulness, while the woman is suffering precisely in the part of her that once was fertile. And although in the logic of triage it is the waning vitality of the little one that seems more urgent, the

logic of the narrative insists that *before the young energy can be released [and made effective], the older energy must be healed.*

It's a very evocative notion – and we see the pattern in many places. Old wounds have a way of blocking new growth (we probably all have our own stories about that). We also see it as we consider the First Nations communities of Canada. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is intended to bring to light the old wounds of the residential schools. And somehow that healing must take place first. The releasing of vitality and potential for flourishing of the contemporary aboriginal communities, as well as the healing of the whole country, is linked to this healing process. I think it is relevant too, to the commitment the church Council has made today to have a good, deep look at how the ministry and leadership are authorized and organized in this congregation, in hopes that if we can get that right, it will release energy for renewed strength. There is work to be done and the congregation must do it. But do it in the spirit of healing that Jesus brings – it is your faith that makes you whole, he says.

I must tell you that I will miss you while I am away. I plan to chain myself to my desk, in hopes of completing a doctoral dissertation started many years ago. It's about Virtue ethics – the question of how we think about and form good character. My deadline is looming, so the timing is propitious. And I am grateful to have the chance to do this without saying a permanent goodbye. I know Alydia will keep tabs on you and let me know how things are going.

So let us pray:

Loving God, your spirit of healing surrounds us at all times and in every way, and for this we give you thanks. You mend what is damaged. You repair what has gone awry. You make whole what is broken. Help us to be open to your love and alert for the ways in which we too may contribute to the healing the world so desperately needs. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.