



Your Faith Has Made You Well

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the 4th Sunday after Pentecost, June 8, 2008 at Christ Church, Detroit.
RCL Readings: Genesis 12:1-9; Psalm 33:1-12; Romans 4:13-25; and Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26.

Matthew's gospel collects most if not all of the miracle stories into chapters 8 and 9 -- a technique designed to emphasize the unique identity of Jesus. Matthew's purpose is to demonstrate that Jesus was not just some gifted teacher wonderworker, or itinerant magician. He was truly the son of God, the anointed one, the Messiah.

The dispute detailed in verses 9-13 is over whether Jesus should associate with obvious sinners, the disreputable outcasts of proper Jewish society. Strict Jews held that they and many other financial professionals were in violation of Torah laws. This morning Jesus encounters Matthew, a customs official and tax collector. Matthew's profession was a despised one so even if he were "honest," he was stigmatized by the Jewish community.

Jesus' operates out of a different paradigm. First, he speaks openly saying "follow me." In verse 10, Jesus is depicted at dinner with an entire roomful of "tax collectors and sinners." Yet Jesus is not preaching before these outcasts, thumping them on the head with a bible, wagging a finger, or lecturing them sternly on their sinfulness.

The Pharisees, those self-righteous paragons of virtue, are appalled at Jesus' and question his disciples about his conduct. Jesus describes himself as a "physician" and sinners as those who are "sick" and the ones in need of healing. By adding a text from Hosea 6:6, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice," he reminds his readers that God's nature is to be merciful. Mercy is what Jesus embodies when he associates with the riffraff.

By combining these two powerful healing stories Matthew portrays the healing power of Jesus as divine. Matthew begins with the "leader of the synagogue" who declares that although his daughter has just died, he believes that if Jesus will but "lay your hand on her," she will be restored to life. But as Jesus travels toward that miracle of resurrection, he encounters a woman with a bleeding disorder who approaches Jesus surreptitiously. For a woman to approach a man in public who was not a member of one's own family was highly improper. To compound matters, because of her disorder she would have been considered ritually unclean (Leviticus 15:25). If she touched Jesus, he himself would be unclean and would need to undergo certain rites of purification before he could be considered "clean."

Instead, the woman touches only the "fringe" of Jesus' garment. All devout male Jews were required by the Torah to wear a special fringed garment or prayer shawl. (Numbers 15:37-39). It distinguished the observant Jew, the chosen, God's elect, from all other people. And it is the fringe of Jesus' garment that she reaches out and touches. And Jesus turns and says to her, "Take heart daughter; your faith has made you well." He might have said, "Take heart and I will make you well," but he doesn't. He says "Your faith has made you well."

They continue in the company of the leader of the synagogue. His faith is remarkable too. In the presence of death itself, he still believes that Jesus can heal. In the presence of such faith, the healing does occur. Faith is what links together Jesus' healing power with the wounded parts of our lives that require his healing touch. Faith is what enables the believer to become so connected to Jesus that his wholeness becomes our wholeness.

In chapters 8 and 9, Matthew lumps all the healing miracle stories together in order to stockpile the evidence that Jesus was truly divine. But as he assembled and edited these stories, Matthew was careful to demonstrate the intentionality of each miracle. Jesus did not sashay around trailing clouds of glory and you could not experience healing simply by traveling

in his train. When Jesus healed, it was deliberate and purposeful. He healed people because God is a healing God.

M. Scott Peck, in his recent book *Further Along the Road Less Traveled: The Unending Journey Toward Spiritual Growth*, tells of a conference where he and Harvey Cox, the Harvard theologian, both spoke.

[Cox] told the story of Jesus' being called to resuscitate the daughter of a wealthy Roman. As Jesus is going to the Roman's house, a woman who has been hemorrhaging for years reaches out from the crowd and touches his robe. He feels her touch and turns around and asks, "Who touched me?" The woman comes forward and begs him to cure her and he does, and then goes on to the house of the Roman whose daughter had died.

After telling the story, Cox asked this audience of 600 mostly Christian professionals whom they identified with. When he asked who identified with the bleeding woman, about a hundred raised their hands. When he asked who identified with the anxious Roman father, more of the rest raised their hands. When he asked who identified with the curious crowd, most raised their hands. But when he asked who identified with Jesus, only six people raised their hands.

Something is very wrong here. Of 600 more or less professional Christians, only one out of a hundred identified with Jesus. Maybe more actually did but were afraid to raise their hands lest that seem arrogant. But again, something is wrong with our concept of Christianity if it seems arrogant to identify with Jesus. That is exactly what we are supposed to do! We're supposed to identify with Jesus, act like Jesus, be like Jesus. That is what Christianity is supposed to be about -- the imitation of Christ.

M. Scott Peck, *Further Along the Road Less Traveled: The Unending Journey Toward Spiritual Growth* (Simon & Schuster, 1993), 210.

The Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles, in his book *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), asked kids to draw pictures showing their feelings about God and to talk about them with him.

Henrietta, a nine-year-old black girl from Boston, drew Jesus healing a blind man. Coles asked what she thought Jesus was saying and feeling when he did this healing. Maybe Jesus sang while he healed, Henrietta replied. When Jesus saw someone in trouble, His heart skipped a beat (178-81).

The Rev. Jesse Jackson knows that there are a lot of people who are suspicious of his religious convictions and who think he is just a publicity hound. And he has a ready answer for them. Jesus never performed any miracle at night! he exclaims. He turned water into wine before a crowd at a wedding feast. He came in to teach and lead by example. He healed a blind man before a crowd. The prophets were public. Jesus was public. You cannot end segregation or slavery in your private closet as a pious person. You cannot end prejudice by treating your maid right. Go forth and preach to the multitudes! This is in the biblical tradition. If you're very private, you don't hate nobody and you don't heal nobody. (Sally Quinn, The G-Word and the A-List: In a Social Setting, There's One Subject Washington Avoids Religiously: God, The Washington Post, July 12, 1999, C1.)

A kindergarten teacher asked her students to bring something related to their faith to class. At the appropriate time, she asked the students to come forward and share with the rest of the students.

The first child said, "I am Muslim and this is my prayer rug."

The second child said, "I am Jewish and this is my Star of David."

The third child said, "I am Catholic and this is my rosary."

The final child said, "I am Southern Baptist and this is my casserole dish."

It reminded me of a colleague who once said, "We Lutherans believe in justification by faith – but it never hurts to bring a covered dish."

In today's passage Matthew shows us Jesus the divine healer, but Jesus shows us faith in action in the actions taken by the father who had lost a daughter and by the woman who touched the fringe of his garment. "Your faith has made you well."