

“When We Are Healed”  
February 16, 2025

Luke 4:38-41

Jesus said many things that continue to be disturbing and challenging to us today. Jesus did many things that continue to leave us puzzled and uncertain. Of all the difficult things that Jesus said and did, healing people might be the most difficult for our modern sensibilities.

Certainly, we know our need for healing.

We are not whole people. We're broken. We're ill. Yes, we're respectable, church-going people. Some of us have power, some have money. Yet when we take a good look at our lives, we see a sickness, a “dis-ease.” And we worry that there's something “incurable” about our situation as well.

So, each week in this place we pray for the healing and wholeness of others and ourselves. We experience new health and new life; and at the same time, we still encounter brokenness, decay, and death.

Each person here is probably aware of brokenness within, a “sickness of spirit.” We don't like to face it. But go ahead and admit it. You're not alone. Your neighbor feels the same way. Within us there are wounds.

A classic prayer of confession admits before God, “There is no health within us.” It speaks to our situation.

We know our broken places.

We long for healing.

We pray for healing.

But stories of healing are troubling.

Maybe it's just me. I'm simply a product of my times and my education.

Like so many here, I was raised in North American mainline Protestantism during the second half of the last century. And during most of that time, there was one thing that most Protestants knew: healing came through scientific advances in medicine, through the skill of physicians and nurses and medical technicians, and through taking good care of ourselves. People who spoke of a connection between faith and prayer and healing were regarded as on the fringe of polite religious society.

Morton Kelsey wrote a wonderful book titled *Healing and Christianity*. He examines the history of healing in the church. Near the beginning of the book he writes: “Most Christian thinking, both Catholic and Protestant, has been swept clean of any idea of Christian healing. On one hand the successes of medicine have made it unnecessary, and on the other, modern theology has made any belief in it untenable.”

This was well illustrated in that old M\*A\*S\*H episode when a desperate Hawkeye called Father Mulcahy to pray for a soldier who was dying. Father Mulcahy assessed the situation and said,

“O.K., but I’m afraid it won’t do much good.” Then he took the soldier’s hand and prayed for him to recover.

The soldier revived.

Hawkeye asks, “What’s that you said about it not doing any good?”

And Father Mulcahy, looking puzzled and disconcerted, said, “It’s not supposed to work that way!”<sup>i</sup>

You see, especially over the last century, most people—even people of faith—haven’t put much stock in God’s healing power. It has seemed far more rational, far easier, to trust in our own human power. So, a minister who speaks of faith and healing runs the risk of appearing, well, goofy at best.

And yet . . . (always, there is an “and yet . . .”)

Kelsey concludes his sweeping survey of healing and the Christian faith by stating: “Healing is one of the experiences that can give people a knowledge of God, a needed relation to God. The fact that healings do occur is also one of the best evidences that a relation to God is possible and needed, and that this view of the world is reasonable.”<sup>ii</sup>

There are those times when I have witnessed healing in others that can only be attributed to prayer, to the very healing action of God.

It’s not that medical care and doctors and nurses aren’t necessary. Of course they are. In recent years, however, the medical profession has been telling people in the churches what we should have been telling them: faith makes a difference in healing. Prayer makes a difference in healing.

The Episcopalian priest, Kamila Blessing—yes that’s her real name—wrote a book called *It Was a Miracle: Stories of Ordinary People and Extraordinary Healing*. She says that when we think about healing, we are inclined to ask: “Why does healing sometimes occur when we pray for it and sometimes it does not?”

I am inclined to ask that. It’s a good question.

Blessing suggests, however, that this is the wrong question—or at least the wrong *first* question. It assumes that God has not healed and that you will know healing when you see it or will receive the healing in the way and at the time you desire. Human imagination is limited,” she says, “and we should not presume that we know all of the ways in which God can heal.”<sup>iii</sup>

Or as it has been said elsewhere: “If God doesn’t seem to be giving you what you ask, maybe God’s giving you something else.”<sup>iv</sup>

I say all of this as a way to help us into those Gospel stories of healing that we heard this morning.

Luke borrowed these stories from the Gospel of Mark and retells them in the simple and quick style of that Gospel: Jesus enters the house of Simon. Simon’s mother-in-law—we don’t know her name, we are *told* her name—is in the grip of a fever.

Illness separates us. We are too weak or too contagious or too tired to be with others. In a sense, that’s all right—we need to rest and to return to health. But we also know that there are times

when we can be too weak, too contagious, or too tired for others to want to be with us. Family stops coming around. Friends stop calling.

Maybe there is a connection between our health and our relationships with other people. Those in the house ask Jesus to help. They'd already seen him cure another. So maybe...

Ignoring some customs and breaking some cultural norms, Jesus, a man, goes to this woman. Jesus, who is well, goes to the one who is sick. Jesus, an outsider, goes to this woman where she lives.

Jesus rebukes the fever. And this, of course, is one of those events that leave us bewildered. Luke, of course had no modern, scientific understanding of illness and disease. The fever is understood as the problem, not the result of an infection. And it is almost personalized, as Jesus rebukes it in the same way he rebukes "unclean spirits."

The fever "left her. Immediately, she got up..." There is a strong sense of resurrection here—getting up, rising up. As the ministry of Jesus begins, we are told where the story is going in the world and in our lives—to new life, to restoration.

Now, this is where the story gets interesting—or becomes a problem: The fever "left her. Immediately she got up... and she began to *serve* them."

Oh, my.

One paraphrase goes so far as to say: "She got up and made them dinner."

OK.

We're left with the troubling feeling that this woman—who is not even named—is healed simply so that she can resume taking care of the men in the house, including this stranger.

But the New Testament scholar Mary Ann Tolbert told us years ago in the *Women's Bible Commentary* that our discomfort might be caused by a faulty translation. Rather than *serve*, a better description of what Simon's mother-in-law does here is *minister*. The Greek word is *diakone*. Being healed, she becomes the first deacon, reciprocally *ministering* to the very One who has just ministered to her.

Restored to health, raised up, she resumes her position in her home, once more having the privilege of sharing hospitality with important guests. It is, says another New Testament scholar, Pheme Perkins, "a matter of honor, not servitude."

So, Perkins affirms that there is a spiritual dimension to healing. Most of us, she says, "have experienced the joy of better-than-expected healing *and* the pain and anger of medical complications or the death of someone we loved." Because of this, she says, it is difficult to hear stories about Jesus healing and not feel cheated. Why, we ask, did the healing we sought or prayed for not happen?

And yet, by faith we say that the One who shows God's power in healing others also knew suffering and death.

There is much about this story of healing that puzzles and confounds us.

There is much about *all healing* that puzzles and confounds us.

What we might begin to understand in any case is that healing comes with a calling, and opportunity. We are restored and brought back into community so that we might live even more fully with one another.

Healing breaks forth into ministry and ministry breaks forth into healing.

And look at what happens as the sun sets. Again, we see the connection between our health and our connection with other people. People arrive at this house bringing those who are sick in so many different ways. And I like the way the Revised English Bible puts this: “All who has friends ill with diseases of one kind or another brought them to Jesus.” Friends caring for friends.

Who will raise us up?

Who will we raise up?

Our lives begin to encounter the good news of this particular story of healing.

By faith we affirm that through scientific endeavors, medical understanding, and yes, even government effort God is raising us up. We find ourselves strengthened by God’s great, healing love. This is the God who gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless—people like you and me.

We find ourselves healed, we find ourselves with new strength, we find ourselves raised up—but these are not ends unto themselves, as good as they are.

We are healed to bring healing to a broken world, to our nation shattered in so many pieces that each of us needs only to look around to find one place that calls for your healing actions.

We are given new strength so that we can work with those who are weak and weary—and you know they are many.

We are raised up so that we might show the power of the resurrection that brings new life in to those who have been cut off.

Keep looking for those places where God’s healing power is apparent or not so apparent.

I am convinced that God is a healing power who desires and seeks the health and wholeness of all God’s creation. I know that healing has occurred—in people, in relationships, in institutions. I know that we are called to bring God’s healing into the world by the lives we live.

And yet the how, the when, and the why of healing remain a mystery.

In our uncertainty, in our confusion, even in our disbelief, let us seek the great healing that God offers and share it with others.

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<sup>i</sup> Kamila Blessing, *It Was a Miracle*, pg. 39

<sup>ii</sup> Morton Kelsey, *Healing and Christianity*, pg. 347.

<sup>iii</sup> Kamila Blessing, *It Was a Miracle*, pg. 22.

<sup>iv</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, pg. 37.