

The God Who Heals



Luke 8: 26-39

This summer we are reading through Luke's life of Jesus. Luke's story shows us that wherever he went, Jesus found people desperate for healing, and time after time they were healed through his compassionate touch.

This month Luke's Gospel will give us one story of healing after another: the Centurion's servant last week; the widow's son this week; the mentally ill, excluded from society; and those in need of forgiveness and spiritual healing. You can't read Luke's Gospel without wrestling with stories of healing. Every time someone met Jesus, they were astonished by the power of God working in him – they came for help, and they were healed. But *how* were they healed?

In the 1960s, for weeks at a time, I was stuck in bed with back pain, praying for my own healing. One day during those months someone gave me a paperback copy of Catherine Marshall's book, *Beyond Ourselves*. Marshall had also been stuck in bed, with tuberculosis. As she prayed for healing she searched the Bible, looking for a pattern in Jesus' healings. She wanted to know how to pray for healing. But she discovered there was no pattern – some people healed by Jesus had faith in him; others had none.

She kept asking the question, *How must I pray to be healed?* She found no answers except these:

We are completely dependent on God's grace.

God always heals – but not always in the ways we want.

But those were not the answers I wanted to hear. I wanted my life back!

Since the time of Jesus, Christians have been led to the ministry of healing. For many centuries, they had no medicines to give, except love. But even in their ignorance – and often in desperation – they still sought to heal the sick. For many centuries, they had little understanding of how the human body works, or what makes us sick. Their motive was love and compassion; their only methods were prayer and tender care.

But by the 20th century the art of healing finally began to improve. New scientific discoveries led to new medicines and new tools. All over the world, people began to live longer. We are living more comfortably than ever before, and new methods and medicines are treating our minds as well as our bodies.

Also in the 20th century, Alcoholics Anonymous was born, with its understanding of how the thirsty soul works. Richard Rohr calls AA one of the great healing movements of the 20th century. For all 12-step programs, the answer to our deep needs is the grace of a Higher Power, which heals us by releasing us from our addictions. Rohr writes,

With practice over time, our grip on our attachments may loosen. But even after many years, for the first several minutes of silent prayer, I still find myself thinking the same old thoughts. And each time I encounter my own powerlessness, I realize again my dependence on my Higher Power.

Many today do not know that AA's roots are profoundly Christian. AA and Al-Anon teach us that we are completely dependent on God's grace. The first three steps show us the path to healing:

- (1) I came to realize my life was unmanageable; I had no power to help myself.
- (2) I came to believe in a power greater than myself, that could heal me.
- (3) I found the strength to turn my life over to God (as I myself understand God).

AA has removed the language of the church, but the message of Jesus has been retained: Give your life to God, and you will find God waiting for you.

The Easter Vigil and the AA meeting

The first year I was a priest, our church held the most glorious Easter Vigil – with lessons from Scripture read in the darkness of the church, members of the congregation holding their candles, and all through the service the choir singing its heart out. The Easter Vigil has always been my favorite liturgy, and that Vigil was the best ever.

But after the Vigil, when the congregation was gone and the church was picked up, I couldn't get into my car. I had arrived at 4 in the afternoon, when the tiny parking lot was empty. Now it was filled with cars, lining the driveway all the way to the street. There was no way to get my car out.

Then I remembered that there was an AA meeting in the church basement, and I knew that was where all the cars came from. So I went down the stairs into the basement, and into the meeting room, hoping to quietly ask the group to move a few cars. But when I opened the door I saw almost 200 people in the room, listening to a speaker giving a powerful message.

So many people! And we had been so happy to have 50 at the Vigil! But more than the number of people, I was astonished by the presence and power of God in that room – and I wished the Church could have such power to heal.

In the years after that, I discovered that in 12-step groups, the power of God works within the individual soul – but it also through the community. Each person works the steps of the program, but no one in the group is on their own.

Like Christians coming to Baptism, each person in AA has a sponsor – who is usually far more available than most Godparents are. Coming to a meeting, people sit in a circle, sharing their lives, revealing their struggles and triumphs and failures. If you miss a meeting, someone will notice you're gone. Someone will call you, ask you for coffee, listen to your life. When you fall, all you have to do is ask for help – just like all those people coming to Jesus in the gospels.

Each and every one of us is in need of healing.

Whether your own life has been wounded, or the life of someone you love, we are all in need of healing and powerless over our addictions – whether they are for alcohol, or drugs, or money, or success. All of us need God's grace; not one of us can be healed by our own power.

And so Jesus tells us, *Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest* (Matthew 11:28).

And 12-step groups tell us, *Let go and let God* – and in God's time and in God's way, we will be healed.

And what about the healing I wanted? Did God answer my prayers? I am not an alcoholic, but both my parents were – and I have other addictions.

I am a perfectionist. This morning, I want to preach the perfect sermon; yesterday I wanted a perfectly clean house. In the 1960s I wanted to be a perfect mother, and I needed a healthy body just to be an adequate mother. With the help of surgery, my back got better.... but I never became a perfect mother... or wife... or friend... or priest. I never became perfect in anything at all.

Instead, I was partially healed: I came to understand that only God is perfect, so if I let go and let God, that will be enough. And most of all, I came to understand that God loves me even with all my imperfections – and this is the healing I need.

A church is meant to be a healing community – not a community of people who think they are healthy, but a community of people who are seeking healing.

I believe that St. Ben's is a healing community, a place where people can support each other and encourage each other, a place where each of us can learn how to depend on God. Look at us this morning. Here we are, sitting in a circle, facing each other. We look with compassion on one another, and often we even take time to listen to each other's stories.

We are already a healing community, and we can continue to heal as God's grace flows to us and through us. How can that happen?

We can learn how to let go and let God. We can teach each other how to let go and let God. And then every thirsty person who comes to St. Ben's, seeking healing and hope, will find the love and grace they need to

Let go and let God.

Preached at St. Benedict's Episcopal Church, Los Osos, by the Rev. Donna Ross – June 5, 2016