

Sermon for Trinity Church

July 21, 2024

Wherever [Jesus] went, village or town or country crossroads, they brought their sick to the marketplace and begged him to let them touch the edge of his coat-- that's all. And who ever touched him became well.

People read the Gospels in many ways. Some read them as step-by-step instruction in life, literal in every way. Still others read the Gospels as simply symbolic, demanding interpretation. And everything in between. Despite growing up in an evangelical household, I was also brought up in the religious conversations of the mid-20th century. I was fortunate to be raised among Sunday school teachers who took their work seriously. The church was much divided at that time between those who thought that the authority of science had the upper hand, and those who thought that science could only undermine miracle and teaching. Many thought that the faithful needed to embrace science; if not, then faith would lack all credibility. But as I stand here this morning, reflecting on those times, more questions have come to mind than answers.

As a result of that era, I was exposed to an early version of what might be called “mansplaining”—careful, apparently reasonable, and above all, scientific interpretations of the Gospels. My wonderful teachers, JD Yearous, John Gaylord, Gerry Peterson, went out of their way to show that the seeming conflicts between fact and faith were easily remedied by harmonizing science and religion. Healings, miracles and more could be read through the lens of science and all doubts resolved. Of course, this opened the door to other readings of the Bible that I continue to value such as seeing God’s decisive arc towards social justice, compassion, and peaceableness. But I must say this, that those good people left some big holes where the subject of healing came into play.

Miracles and most especially, healing, seemed to smack of a primitive faith that could not hold up to the solvent of modern science and insight. I remember one person telling us young people about how Jesus could walk on the water because he had a lower-specific gravity as the Son of God. Still others contended that Jesus was simply employing modern medicine such as resuscitation, long in advance of contemporary humanity. None of them regarded healing as consistent with modern life itself.

Some years later, I was teaching my first year in a public high school. One morning, early on, I came to school with a roaring headache. I was sitting in the teacher’s lunchroom before school, having coffee and hoping to get myself together. I know a few of the other teachers just thought I had been, as the youngest faculty member, spending too much time on the town. But that was not so. I was ill. At that point, a fellow teacher friend offered to heal me. I was startled by the offer (who really can heal?) I could see the other teachers with half-

smiles, watching. But having accepted the offer to be healed, I didn't want to back out. The teacher put his hands on my head and prayed quietly, barely at a whisper. In just moments, my headache was gone and darn it, I was healed. No explanation was needed in the moment because I was healed. I was just plain grateful.

A few years ago, a social scientist who is a known skeptic, set out to figure out how it was that Christianity went from a very small community of people—a few dozen--to embracing in a relatively short time nearly half the citizens of the Mediterranean. He discovered there were several reasons for the explosive growth, but chief among them was the healing work of early Christians. People of those early centuries thought that disease came from malevolent invisible spirits. When someone became very sick, their family might pick up the sick person in a litter and take them into the street. They hoped that the sick might get well while saving the family from evil spirits. As you might surmise, rarely was that the case. But Christians, often a small minority of their village, would take the sick into their homes. Unafraid of death because of their faith—Jesus had already conquered death-- they would take the sick, keep them warm and give them drink and food. And sure enough, those people often recovered. Just do the math—if in a village of say a hundred or so souls, if twenty percent were healed by loving care, those same people became Christians, and in a generation or two of doubling, most of the village became Christians. Rejecting the fear of death must have appeared as miraculous to those who weren't Christians in those early centuries.

Some of you might share similar stories, stories of some kind of healing. I've certainly experienced healing including at the hands of my doctors and nurses. But you might have detected a thread running through my stories—through these stories and more, I'm paying attention not only to those who are healed but also to those who are doing the healing. In each case, a kind of loving compassion reached out to those in need and offered what was required, comfort and a hands-on care for those in need. If you could heal the homeless and hungry in our town, how do you think people would describe it? If you could be hands on with the threatened and destitute whether in the Ukraine or the Sudan or on the borders of many countries, how would those in need think of you? I can't explain miracles in a way that would easily persuade the doubter, but you can be assured, I would not need any explanation for those who have been have received the comfort. Amen.

The Rev. Jeff Bullock

