

## Healing Stories

It's sort of ironic that Jesus keeps giving people a hard time for needing signs in order to believe, yet that's what John centers much of his book on. Signs...there are 7 signs in John's gospel. We usually call them miracles.

Today's stories make up the second and third signs. The first was when Jesus changed water to wine at the wedding in Cana. Three of the signs are healing stories – these two and restoring sight to a blind man.

The other three signs are walking on water, feeding the 5000, and the raising of Lazarus.

These two stories could each stand alone, but putting them together and comparing them can bear fruit as well.

There are three main things I want to address in this morning's message...the first is the issue of faith and healing. The second is some of the difficult aspects of the second story. And then finally we'll tie things together.

In seminary, we do a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education – sort of an intro to chaplain work. While I was doing that, there was a woman who had had multiple hospital admissions for depression. I wasn't really involved in working with her, but my supervisor was. Her daughter had been killed in a car accident several years before.

Already in great pain, she belonged to a church that essentially told her that the reason she couldn't get past her daughter's death was that her faith was weak.

It's tempting to read some of the healing stories, where Jesus says your faith has made you well, and wind up there – that faith is a prerequisite for healing and that enough faith can make you well. In John's gospel, Jesus never says your faith has made you well. And to boot, this pair of stories shatters that idea.

In the first story, the royal official is an exemplar of faith. He's heard about Jesus. He's beside himself with worry over his son. He goes to Jesus and asks for Jesus to come and heal his son. Jesus' reaction seems a bit cold – he seems to be criticizing the father for asking to have his son healed.

But the official sort of ignores Jesus' response about signs. Please, sir, come before he dies. Jesus still doesn't go. Instead, he says, your son will live. And the man trusts that word. He

doesn't know for sure what he will find when he gets home – but he clings to Jesus' promise. He walks in trust and hope but not certainty. Pretty much how this whole faith thing works.

What about the second story? This pool, more familiarly known as Bethesda, is really two pools. An upper pool was unearthed 100 years ago. The lower pool had been built over and was not discovered until much more recently.

The upper pool was a reservoir that replenished the lower pool. The stirring of water may have been when fresh water from the reservoir was allowed to flow into the lower pool. There was a wall between the two. Each wall had a portico, accounting for the five mentioned here.

The pool was a mikveh, or purification bath. Not much is known about how any kind of reputation for its healing powers developed or if it was even true. This is also pretty bad theology – God won't heal you unless you're quick enough? As one commentator said, this may be an early example of medical misinformation.

Jesus didn't confirm or counter the man's belief in the power of the pool. He just said take up your mat and walk. And the man did. Unlike the first story, there's no evidence this man had any faith or even knowledge of Jesus.

Not only that, but when he gets in trouble for carrying his mat on the Sabbath, he throws Jesus under the bus. Not only is there no evidence of faith, he ratted Jesus out.

In verse 14, it's easy to interpret what Jesus says to mean the man was sick for 38 years because of some sin. But that's not what it actually means. The translation is a bit confusing.

Remember, in John, sin equals alienation from God...and since Jesus is God in human flesh, it means alienation from Jesus. The man's sin is not something that happened long ago, but rather it's what happened here - he betrayed the one who just healed him. That's his sin. This guy's relationship with Jesus isn't off to a good start, but it's not all over. Jesus says, essentially, just get back on track.

So, the second man is not an exemplar of faith. In fact, his response suggests he's still not really catching on to who Jesus is. And he doesn't seem to show any gratitude. I found it easy to be unsympathetic towards him. But then I got to thinking about it.

We don't know what's wrong with him, but whatever it is has been going on for 38 years. He can't walk, hasn't been able to support himself, maybe never married nor had a family. He's dependent on charity and has put all his hope in something that it appears will never work for him.

Suddenly, Jesus shows up and it all changes. He could walk! But just when things are looking up, he gets in trouble for carrying his mat on the Sabbath? I mean give the guy a break.

And I realized how easy it is for me to judge...to see him through my own eyes as one who has not had his life experience. This is probably a little sidebar and not the main gist of the message. But it never hurts for me anyway to be reminded to be a little less judgy when I think people have it wrong...to be reminded to try to look at things through the eyes of another.

So, the difference in the two stories invites us to see that faith doesn't appear to be a prerequisite for Jesus to act. Instead of faith being the beginning, sometimes faith is instead a response.

The similarity of the two stories is that in both, a person moves from death to life.

In the first story, Jesus says plain and simple, your son will live. And when the father gets home, he discovers his beloved child who was near death is alive and well.

In the second story, the man isn't strictly speaking near death, but in terms of most of the things we associate with fullness of life, he might as well be.

The stories also invite a deeper exploration of healing. We all know that not everyone who is prayed over even survives let alone experiences cure. But that doesn't mean healing isn't still happening.

I read a book on prayer by Marjorie Suchocki. The author's son-in-law was diagnosed with lymphoma. During his illness he became part of a group who prayed for each other and for others. He wasn't cured and he ended up dying from the lymphoma. But he described the deep sense of wholeness and healing from the prayers of others for him and for his own prayers for others. And prayer connected him even more deeply to his own family.

Sometimes people who are dying will experience deep healing of relationships with family...and even God, which is what John is all about. Healing happens, even when cure doesn't.

Whatever is wrong with the second man, it doesn't appear to be fatal. For someone like him in our time, healing might look like people given the gifts and inspiration to develop technologies and policies that improve accessibility.

Someone who is paralyzed and depends on a wheelchair for mobility may not be given the ability to get up and walk. But when adaptations to their surroundings are made, they too are able to experience the fullness of life – they are in a very real sense healed.

Life...that's what at the heart of the healing stories in John. Later on in the gospel we'll hear Jesus say, I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. Always, Jesus is working on behalf of life.

During our lives, healing happens in many different ways. Even in terminal illness, we can experience healing of spirit, relationship with God can heal and grow, and relationships with others can heal and can grow.

But then... these stories point even further – they point to resurrection. And we are reminded that ultimate healing happens when we are joined to Christ in that final great healing.