

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, February 4, 2024

“The Healing Power of Jesus”

The Message

In today's scripture passage, we hear the story of the first person that Jesus heals in the Gospel of Mark as part of his early ministry.

Before we get into the nuts and bolts of this story, I want us to define a couple terms first.

Can anyone define the word “cure” or “curing”?

What about the word “heal” or “healing”?

Is there a difference?

The actual definition of cure is “to relieve (a person or animal) of the symptoms of a disease or condition.”

And the actual definition of heal is “to become sound or healthy again, or to alleviate a person's distress or anguish.”

These may seem like subtle differences in the definitions of these two words, but in practice, we conceive of these words quite differently.

For example, imagine a woman named Sally.

Sally prays diligently every day. She prays for specific outcomes for health and healing, both for herself and for others.

She knows other Christians who testify to God's healing in their own lives, and of course the Bible describes Jesus as an amazing miracle worker, just like he is described in the Mark passage we read today.

But, despite her persistence and diligence, her prayers often go unanswered.

She prayed for her grandparents and prayed that they would be cured of all that ailed them, but they passed away from their ailments.

She asked God to cure the relationship between her sister and brother-in-law, but they ended up divorced.

She prayed that God would help cure hunger and disease in poverty-stricken places, but hunger and disease persists all over the world.

Sally began to keep track of her prayers, and started to note those that were answered and those that weren't, and she started to notice a disheartening pattern:

The majority of her prayers for specific outcomes for healing or curing herself or her loved ones were not answered.

This realization pushed Sally almost over the edge, to the point where she felt that prayer may not be a useful tool for her faith anymore.

She still had faith, but wasn't sure that prayer did much good, and she had proof that it didn't seem to change outcomes, at the very least.

Sally's friends at church tried to explain by saying things like "it's just part of God's plan" or "it makes you appreciate your own health and wellness even more," or "God is building character by allowing these things to happen."

Some people even blamed demons or Sally's own lack of faith for her unanswered prayers.

People pointed to biblical statements about the faith of those that Jesus heals.

They implied that those who were not healed simply did not believe, or did not believe strong enough, or hard enough.

But Sally felt even more discouraged by these comments and ways of seeing prayer because she did believe, and she prayed hard.

She believed in Jesus's stories of healing and miracles, and she had faith in God.

So why weren't Sally's prayers being answered?

Why did her prayers seem to go unanswered more than they were answered?

It's of course hard to answer this question with certainty because it's a hypothetical, fictional scenario.

But, I do think many people have similar questions about prayer, about healing, and about Jesus's promises to heal the sick and demon-possessed.

But, what if we are looking at these stories of healing with inaccurate assumptions?

First of all, we tend to assume that use of the word “heal” automatically means “cure.”

We assume that Jesus casting out demons means he cured the person and there was nothing left for the person to do on their own to heal or integrate back into society.

We also tend to overlook parts of these stories like, for example, subtle cues in today’s passage.

We heard in the translation we read today that Jesus “healed **all kinds** of terrible diseases and forced out **a lot** of demons.”

It does not say Jesus healed **every single** terrible disease, nor does it say that he cast out **everyone’s or all** demons.

Even Jesus could only do so much. The passage says that *all* who were sick or had demons were brought to Jesus, but it also says “in fact, the whole town gathered around the door.”

Are we to assume then that the entire town had some kind of affliction or illness or demon that needed to be healed or cast out?

Our assumption when we read stories like this is that Jesus *cured* every person with any kind of affliction.

Then, when we turn to prayer in our lives today, we assume based on these stories that God is able to cure every affliction we or others have today.

But our assumptions in the scriptures may not be accurate.

Jesus is only able to do so much. In fact, in Mark 6: 1-6, Jesus goes to Nazareth and is able to perform some miracles but not others.

What if, when the Bible talks about healing, it is not always talking about curing every affliction?

What if, instead, we expand our assumptions and our own definitions of healing beyond specific outcomes?

For example, what if Sally prayed for her grandparents in such a way that would open her mind to the ability to see her prayers being answered because she stopped trying to control the outcomes?

Instead of praying for her grandparents to be cured of all their ailments, Sally might have prayed that they healed mentally, spiritually, and emotionally and that God would be by their sides as they navigated the waters of illness, age, and physical decline.

If we expand our assumptions when we read these healing stories in scripture, we can go beyond Jesus simply curing physical or mental ailments, and we can move instead toward Jesus providing mental and spiritual wholeness and healing, regardless of the physical, bodily outcome.

If we can understand these stories of healing not necessarily as purely *curing*, but as healing of mind, body, and spirit, then we can move beyond specific outcomes of curing into thinking about wholeness and wellness differently.

And if we can think about healing this way in scripture, we can also think about healing differently in our everyday lives as well.

I heard an amazing speech once given by a woman who had a chronic illness.

She said to her audience that she didn't want their prayers that a cure would be found for her illness.

What she wanted was prayers for healing and wholeness, acceptance of her disease, and an understanding of how she could navigate in an able-bodied world.

She didn't want pity, and she knew that prayers for a cure would go unanswered because science hadn't gotten that far yet.

It wasn't hopeless. It was realistic, and she knew that any prayers for her healing had to accept her situation as it was.

And she was OK with it! It just meant she needed to navigate her world differently, and accepting that fact allowed her to move toward wholeness in ways that many of us who are able-bodied aren't able to do.

I think Jesus moves us toward healing in far more ways than simply physical, bodily healing.

Jesus healed people, yes. But that healing was much more than surface-level.

It was more than the healing we could see on the outside.

God wants to see us healed, and God wants to heal.

And sometimes, miracles do happen.

The Good News of today's message is that healing can happen even if physical curing is not possible.

Rethinking our assumptions can help us better understand the difference between being cured and being healed.

And my hope, for you as individuals, for our church community, for your families, for our local community, for our nation and for our world is that we can move toward healing and wholeness rather than focusing solely on curing our ailments.

May we be open to expanding our minds and our hearts to a wider, deeper understanding of healing that goes beyond bodily cures and moves us toward wholeness. Amen.

Let us pray:

Healing God, today we pray with gratitude that you have given us our lives and this community as a network of support, love, and compassion that sustains us through life's challenges. We ask that you continue to guide us toward health and healing, even if a cure for our ailments is not yet possible. We seek a deeper understanding of healing that goes beyond our physical bodies and reaches deep into our souls. In your holy name we pray, amen.