

“Perspectives on healing” a sermon based on Mark 5:21-43 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 1 July 2018.

Sam Wells is the vicar of St Martins in the Fields in London. When he was a young teenager his mother asked him one day to sit down beside her. She took his hand. “Samuel, I have something to tell you.” Ever since, he said, a cold shiver has gone down his spine when someone has used that phrase. She said – “The cancer that I have is not going to get better and in a few months it will kill me.” He said – “My childhood ended when she said that to me.” As she predicted, in a few months Sam’s mother died. Between receiving the news that day and his mother’s death a few months later, he never prayed for her healing. He now wonders why. He does not judge his younger self – he had not done anything wrong and after all he was young and out of his depth. And his mother was a nurse and emphasis was put on accepting facts. But was it more than that? Was it a lack of faith? Or was it a protecting of himself from disappointment? Or was it, he wondered, protecting God from Sam’s anger and despair and terror?

His family was in the tradition of quiet healing.

Sam says there is loud healing and quiet healing.

Loud healing is accompanied by a lot of shouting and a four syllabled pronunciation of Jesus – Jay/ee/sa/is! And, I suggest, the expectation of miracle. I hear of loud healing occasionally. At a recent gathering a person spoke of how their congregation was praying for a miraculous healing of someone undergoing chemotherapy treatment.

Quiet healing is accompanied by words like wholeness and journey. It avoids large crowds and wants to be distant from loud healing. I hear of quiet healing every week and use its language.

When I pray beside a hospital bed my prayer often focuses on thankfulness for a network of support, family and friends and church, for professional skill - doctors and nurses and support staff. I often borrow the imagery of Psalm 139 “it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” I pray for the person a peaceful spirit that enables as much synchronicity as possible between our inner being and outside work. I pray for all who support the person. I pray for the spirit of creation to bring wholeness and in some circumstances to work with the body for healing.

Discussion of health and faith raises tender questions. Prayer for health raises tender questions. How do we talk about healing in the presence of people who are seriously unwell, in the presence of people who have prayed for the healing of friends and relatives who have not recovered, and in the face of injustice where millions of people around the world die every year lacking the most basic resources like food and clean water? How do we speak about healing in the face of health systems that privilege some over others?

Healing in the gospels does not stand alone. It is always an expression of the realm of God breaking in now.

Remember that the backdrop for the gospel is the oppressive defining of life by the Roman Empire, the disempowering of people, the tyranny of death inflicted by the Romans. Their killing of people reflected the gross injustices of the time. There was also a culture of shame of people seen as unworthy, immoral and unhealthy. The woman who had haemorrhages is one. She was deemed unclean and anyone she touched was deemed unclean. She was hoping for quiet healing, a touch that would enable her to slip away unseen. Jesus overturned that dehumanising culture, breaking religious and cultural rules to include people deemed unworthy and cursed. Four times “touching” is mentioned, because touching broke the taboo that kept her in place.

Mark and Mark’s Jesus give priority to her over a man of power and influence, a leader of the synagogue, a person in the system with access to healing. Jesus gives priority to the most persistently excluded over the persistently included, the people with health insurance and sufficient funds to pay for their health.

In this story, healing is part of the Jesus revolution, the turning upside down of ways that prevented people from flourishing, of being whole. So the healing changed her place in society. She came from being at the edge of the community into the middle of the crowd to stand before the holy one, the godly one, the loving one. And there she was able to tell the whole truth about herself.

As Ched Myers says – “Mark shapes this story to intentionally juxtapose the two extremes of the Jewish social scale.”

The overturning of priorities represents the healing of a system, a culture, a society, a faith to enable the flourishing of people. Paul spoke of Jesus as one who though rich yet for our sakes became poor. He could have said, Jesus who though well yet for us became unwell so that we might be whole.

One of the words for wholeness in our tradition is salvation. Sam Wells highlights how salvation comes to our past and our future.

In relation to our past, salvation transforms it from a burden to a gift, from an impediment to a source of wisdom. It is called the forgiveness of sins.

Forgiveness doesn't change the past. But it releases us from the power of the past. Forgiveness doesn't rewrite history. But it prevents our histories asphyxiating us. Fundamentally forgiveness transforms our past from an enemy to a friend, from a horror-show of shame to a storehouse of wisdom.

The woman with haemorrhages.

In relation to our future, salvation turns it from curse to blessing, from fear and death to a destiny of hope and glory. It is called eternal life.

These are the gifts of Jesus Christ, forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Healing comes in the space between.

Even when we are forgiven, there is still work to be done - learned patterns to be unlearned, mess to be tidied up, hurt and pain and damage to be addressed. And so there is the third part of salvation, healing, an ongoing process that moves us towards flourishing, towards wholeness, between our pasts and our futures.

Our past is turned from shame to gift, our future is turned from fear to hope, and healing works with us now, in between.

Now if forgiveness does its work and we live in it, and if we sense eternal life and we live in it, healing brings possibilities, for who we are in community, with a purpose worth living for. But if our past and futures are not addressed, healing may not help us. Indeed when we think we need healing, what we might need most of all is forgiveness and eternal life. And when we live in those, we might find ourselves less desperate for healing.

Now of course, when we are unwell, when our friends or family are unwell, we long for healing. And in the presence of millions who die every year through lack of food and clean water, we long for healing. For a society that continues to privilege some over others, we long for healing. Healing and justice belong together.

And so, we come again to tender questions -

Does God heal? Sometimes.

Is it ok to pray for healing? In private, always, if you wish. In public, sometimes, provided it is not insensitive towards the person, to other people nearby, and we don't expect god to do magic.

Does God give forgiveness and eternal life? Always.

This sermon draws on material in a sermon by Sam Wells preached at Duke University Chapel in 2009. It can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKpS8zgg6TE> and on the Knox Church website - <https://knoxchurch.net/>

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