

May 15, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Faith and Healing

Matthew 9:18 – 30a

This morning's message is just a little interlude from our study in the Gospel of John – we will be back in John after this. But I wanted us to look this morning at faith and healing. We announced two weeks ago that we are going to do something we've never done here before and that is we are going to have a night of intercession for healing this Tuesday night, starting at seven pm. It is not that we haven't prayed for healing before – we have, often on Sunday mornings when someone comes up and asks for prayer, often during our regular Tuesday night prayer meetings, and in our home fellowship groups. But we've never devoted one of our gathering times specifically to prayer for healing. Two weeks ago a couple of young ladies came up to me to ask if we could devote one night of prayer for one of the young men in our congregation who has been suffering some real physical problems. And as I prayed and pondered their request, it seemed the Lord was saying 'Set aside an evening of prayer for healing, not just for this young man, but for all those in the church who are suffering from sickness, pain and disease.' And so this Tuesday we are going to do just that.

But as pumped as I was to hear the Lord saying that – I was at the same time struck with my own sense of inadequate faith. I don't know about you, but much of the time I don't seem to have the great faith that I often read of in the Bible that led to miraculous healing. I think about the story of the centurion, who came to Jesus and asked Him to heal his servant and said, 'You don't even have to come to my house – just say the word.' And the Bible says that Jesus was amazed by his faith. I mostly don't feel like Jesus is amazed by my faith – it is more like He is amazed at my lack of faith. But I do know where I need to go to get more faith – the word of God. Paul tells us that '***Faith comes from hearing and hearing from the word of Christ***', Romans 10:17 and so it is to the word of God I go when I need to strengthen my faith.

We just read three stories in the gospel of Matthew that involve faith and healing and I want to draw some lessons on faith and healing for us from these. I say some lessons, because this will be by no means a definitive discussion on faith and healing. In fact there are few subjects in Scripture more perplexing than the relationship between faith and healing. Jesus tells people at times, like in these stories, 'Go your way, your faith has made you well', or like He told the Caananite woman who pestered Him to heal her demonized daughter, 'Woman your faith is great, be it done to you as your wish'. But at other times He doesn't mention faith at all, as in the story of the man at the pool of Bethesda that we looked at last week, or as in the story of Jairus and his daughter here in Matthew. Trying to build a systematic theology of faith and healing by looking at the ministry of Jesus seems to be an impossible task. It doesn't fit neatly into any sort of system.

Furthermore, there doesn't seem to be any methodology in healing. Sometimes Jesus heals with a word, sometimes He healed without a word. Sometimes He touches people, and sometimes He doesn't even come near them. One time He made a mixture of mud with His spit, put it on the mans eyes and then told him to go wash it off. Another time He put His own saliva on someone's tongue and healed him. Sometimes He demands action from those who want healing, and yet at other times He seems to heal without demanding they do anything. Sometimes He healed everyone, and sometimes He only picked out one person to heal. In the stories we have before us this morning – the woman gets healed by her touching Him and the little girl and the two blind guys are healed by Him touching them.

What that should tell us is that we are not going to get a handle on faith and healing by simply looking at the methods. Throughout the Bible, God uses many methods to heal. In Numbers, anyone who looked at the bronze serpent was healed – Elijah brought a dead boy to life by laying on him three times – Naaman was healed of leprosy by dunking in the Jordan River seven times – and Hezekiah the king was healed when Isaiah directed his servants to make a cake of figs and put on the infected boil. In the Acts we read about people getting healed just by having handkerchiefs that Paul had touched placed on them. In other words, faith and healing don't come by 'doing the right thing'. Sometimes I think we view faith and healing somewhat superstitiously – if we say the right words, or pray the right way, or fast for forty days or any number of other methods, we will see the Lord heal. But we need to disabuse ourselves of the idea that healing comes through the right method – it is clear there is no right method.

What we do see in Scripture, and not just here in Matthew, is that faith, more often than not, seems to be an operative factor in healing. If you look at passages like **Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 2:1-12; 9:17-24; 10:46-52; Luke 17:11-19; Acts 3:16; 14:8-10**, what you see is faith emphasized in relation to healing. Which really begs the question, 'Why does Jesus emphasize faith?' He is the one healing, not us. He doesn't need faith – He is not hindered or hampered by our lack of faith, as we saw last week with the man by the pool. So why even require it?

Let me put it to you as Dr. Sam Storms puts it in his book on spiritual gifts: *'...faith glorifies God. Faith points us away from ourselves to him. Faith turns us away from our own power and resources to his. Faith says, "Lord, I am nothing and you are everything. I entrust myself to your care. I cling to you alone. My confidence is in your word and character no matter what happens." Faith is not a weapon by which we demand things from God or put him in subjection to us. Faith is an act of self-denial. Faith is a renunciation of one's ability to do anything and a confession that God can do everything. Faith derives its power not from the spiritual energy of the person who believes, but from the supernatural efficacy of the person who is believed: God! It is not faith's act but its object that accounts for the miraculous.'*

So what about faith and healing? Lets look at these three stories and try and hear what God is saying to us. There are four things about faith I see in these stories and my intent here is to build your faith and mine as we study the word: **Faith is often born out of desperation – Faith ignores the circumstances – Faith understands that we don't deserve anything – and Faith perseveres.** First of all, **faith is often born out of desperation.** Look at verse 18: *While He was saying these things to them, a synagogue official came and bowed down before Him, and said, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay Your hand on her, and she will live."* Matthew 9:18

Matthew doesn't give this guy a name, but from the same accounts in Mark and Luke we know that his name is Jairus. Jairus was a synagogue official which meant that he was the president of the synagogue, and the administrative head of the city, which was Capernaum. [pics of synagogue] In other words, he was a prominent man with a very high social position, and he came to Jesus and literally the word says, 'he worshipped Him'. Only desperation could drive a man of his position to worship a no-account, itinerant rabbi like Jesus. But Jairus had a need that could not be met by anyone else. I don't think this was a great faith – I think it was a last-ditch faith. He literally had no where else to go.

It is interesting here that Matthew sort of condenses the scene to say that his daughter was dead – but both Mark and Matthew tell us that when he first approached Jesus, his daughter was still alive. It wasn't until someone came from his house moments later that he learned that his daughter had died. And the sense of the language here indicates that Jairus is pleading over and over, loudly and earnestly for Jesus to come and lay His hands on her. And we can see that while his is a desperate faith, in comparison to say, the centurion, it was still very small. He didn't have any faith that Jesus could do this from a distance. And yet Jesus responds to his small, desperate faith.

At that point, Matthew introduces the second character in this story, a woman who had been suffering a sickness for twelve years: *Jesus got up and began to follow him, and so did His disciples. And a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years, came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak; for she was saying to herself, "If I only touch His garment, I will get well."* Matthew 9:19 – 21 Again, a desperate faith compells this woman to sneak through the crowd to get to Jesus. We get a fuller picture of this drama when we look at the account in Mark chapter 5: *And He went off with him; and a large crowd was following Him and pressing in on Him. A woman who had had a hemorrhage for twelve years, and had endured much at the hands of many physicians, and had spent all that she had and was not helped at all, but rather had grown worse - after hearing about Jesus, she came up in the crowd behind Him and touched His cloak. For she thought, "If I just touch His garments, I will get well.* Mark 5:24 – 28

This woman was not just sick – did you notice what Mark said? She had endured much at the hands of many physicians. That is she had tried many, many things – undergone many, many treatments, and believe me, some of the treatments in those days were horrific. And she was destitute – she had spent all that she had and she had not only not gotten any better – she was worse off than if she hadn't taken any treatments at all! She was desperate. All the accounts indicate that there was this large crowd following Jesus, and this woman had to push her way through the crowd. And Jesus, at one point, stops walking and says, 'Who touched Me?' And the disciples hardly knew what to say because everybody was touching Jesus. But the startling fact is, out of all those people around Jesus, touching Jesus, bumping up against Jesus, jostling Jesus, there was only one desperate woman who actually connected with Jesus.

And then we have the third story – the two blind men: *As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!"* Matthew 9:27 The text indicates that when these guys understood that it was Jesus going by, they got up and started following the crowd, all the time yelling out, 'Have mercy on us, Son of David!' They were desperate. They had evidently heard of Jesus, and they didn't want to miss the opportunity. I mean these guys couldn't see and it wasn't like they were going to travel all over the place to find Him – it was now or never for them. And Jesus always seems to respond to faith that is born of desperation. A faith that has no power or resources of its own but wholly relies on the power of God. Faith is not conjuring up some sort of positive thinking – faith, real faith, begins with a desperation born of emptiness.

Secondly, I think we see that **faith ignores the circumstances**. In the case of Jairus, he ignores his social prominence and high connections to ask Jesus to heal his daughter. And when he finds out she is dead, he still leads Jesus to his home, hoping against hope that He can do the impossible. The woman, braves the crowd, fights her way through with a single-minded purpose just to touch His clothes. She was actually flouting the cultural and religious laws by doing this. Her particular sickness rendered her effectively unclean, and anyone she touched would have become unclean as well – but she didn't care. And the blind guys ignore the fact that there is a crowd of people around Jesus who probably don't appreciate them stumbling around yelling at Jesus because they just want to see and they think He can help them. In fact there may have been many people who could see in that crowd that might have felt that it would be imposing on Jesus to bother Him about their particular affliction. Their sight, in that case would have prevented them from getting relief, just as these two guys blindness facilitated their healing. They couldn't see the crowd and what is more, they couldn't care less. **Faith ignores the circumstances.**

Thirdly I think these stories show us that **faith understands that we don't deserve anything**. That is, there is no sense in which we deserve anything but death. Faith makes no demands on God, sets no conditions, faith is not a weapon we wield against God and demand that He heal us. There is a prominent theology in Christian circles that teaches that since Jesus died for all our sins and sicknesses, we have healing in his atonement already and we simply need to claim it, because Isaiah tells us that Jesus *'...Himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases.'* Matthew 8:17 Proponents of this teaching then conclude that we are somehow deserving of healing and if we don't get healed, we don't have enough faith. But that wasn't the posture of Jairus, that wasn't the attitude of the woman, and it certainly wasn't what the blind guys were saying. They weren't naming it and claiming it – they were saying, *'Have mercy on us, Son of David!'*

Real faith starts when we realize that all we can hope to get from God is mercy. If you will accept it, **whatever pain or pleasure that comes our way is the mercy of God to us**. What rebellious, hostile sinners deserve is punishment and death. But the Lord delights to extend mercy to those who call on Him. That is what Jairus wanted – mercy for his daughter. That is all the woman wanted – for this man to have mercy on her. The writer of Hebrews tells us that mercy awaits those who draw near to God: *Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* Hebrews 4:16 Our confidence in praying for healing is that God will hear us and will grant mercy and grace to help us in our time of need. That is the kind of God He is.

Look at what Jesus says to Jairus when they brought the news that his daughter had died: *But when Jesus heard this, He answered him, "Do not be afraid any longer; only believe, and she will be made well.* Luke 8:50 Look at the mercy He extends to the woman who struggled through the crowd to touch Him: *But Jesus turning and seeing her said, "Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well." At once the woman was made well.* Matthew 9:22 And look at what He tells the blind guys: *Then He touched their eyes, saying, "It shall be done to you according to your faith."* Matthew 9:29 **Faith understands that we don't deserve anything.**

And lastly, and perhaps most importantly, **faith, real faith, is persevering faith**. Jairus could have given up when he got the news that his daughter had died. He could have said, 'Thanks for coming, but I don't think You can do anything now.' The woman could have looked at the crowd following Jesus and concluded that there was no way she could get to Him. The blind guys could have called out to Jesus once and then shut up. But they didn't - they kept at it until He turned around and touched their eyes. This story is very reminiscent of the story of Blind Bartimaeus who was sitting by the road as Jesus came by one day. *When he heard that it was Jesus the Nazarene, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many were sternly telling him to be quiet, but he kept crying out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"* Mark 10:47-48 The crowd's attempt to shush him up only worked to stir him up to call out all the more for mercy.

Sometimes our theology gets in the way of our healing. We may have concluded that since God is sovereign over all things, and He knows all things, that we'll ask Him politely for healing once – and then submit to His sovereign will. But that is not what the Bible means when it talks about God's sovereignty over all things. **The sovereignty of God over all things means that our persistent prayers for healing are included in the all things over which God is ruling.** In fact Jesus tells a story in Luke chapter 18, that teaches one thing: that we should always pray and not lose heart. That is we should be persistent in prayer. And the story is about this poor widow and this unrighteous judge, who keeps ignoring this poor woman who comes to him for justice, until this wretch of man is completely worn down by her dogged persistence and gives in to her demands. And then Jesus makes this commentary on the story: *And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them?" "I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly.* Luke 18:7-8

And the point is not that God is like this wretched judge who has to be pestered to give in to our prayers for mercy – the point is that God is **NOT** like the judge. He is exactly opposite. Our persistent prayers for mercy do not fall on deaf ears, our cries for help are heard by His heart of great compassion. The faith to persevere in prayer is great faith, and it is saving faith. Hebrews 11 tells us: *And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.* Hebrews 11:6 That is, if we diligently, perseveringly, earnestly seek Him – that faith is rewarded. **Real faith is persevering faith.**

Let me close with this personal illustration. It is not an illustration of great faith. In fact when it comes to healing, my faith is rather small. A few years ago I got a call from a dear friend of mine whose brother Rusty, was in the hospital with serious problems and she wanted me to go and pray for him. Now I really hate hospitals, there are a lot of sick people there and I'd just as soon not be reminded of the littleness of my faith for healing. But what could I say? Of course I said I'd go, but at the same time I wondered if she knew that most of the people I had prayed for in the hospital had died? Well, I certainly didn't tell her that but went to pray for Rusty. She couldn't come, and I didn't know Rusty, and I wasn't sure what to expect. I went on a mission like this once before, going to see someone I didn't know, only to have the guy refuse any kind of prayer, and basically ask me to leave.

When I got to his room, it was worse than I had expected. He was lying in his bed in a coma, hooked up to life support and looked like he already had one foot in the grave. That didn't encourage my faith at all. I was actually thankful my friend wasn't there to see me because failure was written all over my face I'm sure. I waited till the nurses were out of his room and prayed a quick prayer and left. I seriously thought the guy would expire before I left the hospital. But he didn't, and I got a call the next day from my friend asking me to come and pray again. My first thought was, 'He's still alive?' But I kept it to myself and went up and prayed with her and prayed for him. That went on for 52 days. Nearly every other day I was up there praying for Rusty. Little by little Rusty came out of his coma, went off the life support and started getting better. And then on day 53 he walked out of the hospital perfectly whole.

It was obvious to me that his healing had nothing to do with the strength of my faith, but rather with the object of my faith. It was not the depth of my faith but the direction of my faith. We will miss it if we think that we can muster up enough faith for healing. Quite honestly, any faith that we can conjure up will never be robust enough to heal us. **The faith that heals is the faith we place in the object of our pleas for mercy.** I realized that sometimes God is pleased to heal because we are persistent in asking. Jesus tells us to keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking until we get an answer from heaven. In fact I believe that the only time we should stop praying for healing is when God unmistakably says to stop. **Real faith is persevering faith.**

Some of you have perhaps prayed for healing, once or twice, maybe for weeks and months, and have not seen the healing you prayed for, and perhaps you have concluded that it is not God's will for you to be healed, and so you have given up. Let the word of God encourage you this morning to keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking because God's will for you is to find mercy and grace at His throne of grace. **Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.** Hebrews 4:16

Our gracious and merciful Father,

Grant us a desperate faith that rests on Your great compassion and mercy. Give us the boldness and confidence to cry out 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Assure our hearts once again, that at Your gracious invitation we find deliverance and healing, mercy and grace at Your throne. Help us not conclude from what we see that You are deaf to our prayers for mercy but grant us that persistent faith that presumes on Your promise to answer those who keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking, and rests on the solid foundation of Your great love and compassion toward those who bear Your name. May we count every pain and every pleasure as evidence of Your love and mercy toward us, and let us never doubt Your sovereign control over all sickness and disease. You are Jehovah Rapha – the Lord our Healer and we come to You this morning for healing and wholeness – Son of David, have mercy on us we pray, in the triumphant, healing name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.