

Gospel of John, Part 9:  
A Tale of Two Healings

If you were to ask Jesus to heal you for something right now, what would it be? I invite you to ponder this for about 30 seconds . . . [pause]

There is no end to our need for healing. Whether it is for an illness, an injury, a fear, an emotional wound, a broken relationship, or anything else that is keeping us from living as fully and as joyfully as we might wish. And so it is no surprise that the four gospels are full of stories in which Jesus healed someone of something. And it's no surprise that he healed all kinds of people: men and women; young and old; rich and poor; fellow Israelites and foreigners. Each story is unique, each one worthy of its own sermon, or lesson, or discussion.

But here at this point in the Gospel of John, just after his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, we have two healing stories, one right after the other. And I believe there are special insights to be gained by comparing the two of them in a single sermon. I'll begin by pointing out some of the ways they are different from one another. (For those of you who like to take notes, or for that matter, doodle while you're listening, Becky has given you an entire half page in the bulletin on which to do so!)

For starters, the second of these stories, the one at the beginning of Chapter 5, was included in the Lectionary, the three-year cycle of biblical readings that many churches follow; the first was not. Implying that the second must be the more important of the two. And yet the first story, in which Jesus heals an official's son, is declared by John to be one of Jesus' "seven signs" in the gospel. One would think that all seven of those would merit inclusion in the lectionary. If it hadn't been for my sermon series, I might never have preached on this particular healing. And yet, aren't all healings important? All stories in which Jesus encounters someone in need? We may very well find ourselves in one of those stories.

Second, one of these healings was in Galilee, the other in Jerusalem. You'll recall that Jesus had just been in Samaria, where he had had that long conversation with the woman at the well, and then had astonishingly been invited to stay to for two days. After which, as we heard this morning, he had gone back north to Galilee, that beautiful, mountainous region encircling the Sea of Galilee and bordering the Jordan River. Jesus was safe in Galilee—or at least safer. It was a comfortable distance from the centralized power structures to be found further south in Jerusalem. It was surely tempting for him to simply remain in Galilee. He could have lived a nice, long life teaching the crowds along the Sea, or gathered in Galilee's synagogues. But Jesus was a man always on the go, as if he knew his time was short, and he needed to visit as many places and meet as many people as possible. So I think we can say with confidence that there is nowhere Jesus will not go, nowhere his healing, saving love does not reach. Including Marion County, KS.

Third, one of these stories involved a Jewish person; the other a Gentile. As I emphasized last week, Jesus was a Jew. And in all four gospels he says things that intimate his mission was first and foremost to the Jews. Yet, in all four gospels we meet Gentiles, who are clearly outsiders in first-century Palestine, who nevertheless show a level of faith and readiness to believe that gets Jesus' attention (as does the royal official in today's first healing tale). Leading us to conclude that Jesus' mission ended up being very much for the outsiders as well as

the insiders. Which reminds us of two very important things. One, we mustn't exclude anyone from Jesus' healing love. And two, we mustn't exclude ourselves, no matter how unworthy or weak in faith we may feel.

Fourth, lest there be any doubt of how inclusive and expansive Jesus' love is, consider the following difference between these two stories. One of them involved a royal official, a person of power; the other involved a man who had been nothing but an invalid for 38 years. Reminding us that no matter how powerless we may sometimes feel, Jesus notices us, and has the power needed to heal us. And while we can tend to be critical or judgmental of those in our world who do have power, Jesus excludes no one. He honored, or at least wasn't deterred by the royal official's power.

Fifth, in the same way, while throughout the four gospels Jesus talked a lot about the perils and pitfalls of wealth, he wasn't deterred by the royal official's wealth (a wealth demonstrated by his owning slaves). But we saw how Jesus intentionally reached out to the invalid at the pool, who clearly had no slaves. So we can rest assured that while many of us are wealthy by the world's standards, and while we do need to be reminded of the pitfalls of our wealth, that does not prevent Jesus' loving attention from reaching us.

Sixth, in the story of the official's son, Jesus' healing was requested, whereas in the story of the invalid it was not. Indeed the official sought Jesus out, and begged him to come heal his son. But the invalid didn't ask for the healing he received. In fact, when Jesus asked him if he wanted to be healed, the man didn't even answer the question affirmatively or directly. And yet, Jesus saw his obvious need, and healed him anyway.

We may not know the way or ways in which we need healing. It may be buried deep below our awareness. Or we may not know how to ask for the healing we need. After thirty-eight years of waiting, the invalid may not have known that healing was still possible, let alone that Jesus had the power to provide it. But that clearly didn't stop Jesus from doing so. Jesus saw the man's need. Just as he sees ours. And he offers us his healing, even if we don't know how to ask.

Seventh, one of the healings restored the use of the elderly invalid's legs. The other saved a young boy from dying. Suggesting that no need is beyond Jesus' healing powers.

Eighth, while Jesus was physically present with the invalid when he healed him, the official's son Jesus healed from a distance. The official, as we know, begged Jesus to "come down" to Capernaum where his son was, which from Cana would have required at least a day's journey. In many of the healing stories in the gospels Jesus physically goes to the person in order to heal him or her, and in some cases goes to great lengths to provide the needed healing (for example, when he put mud on the blind man's eyes). But with the official's son Jesus merely said to him, "Go, your son will live," and he was healed. Perhaps that was in part because of the father's confidence in Jesus. But even then the father wasn't sure whether Jesus had granted his request until his slaves met him on his journey home. Such is Jesus' healing power that a mere word makes it happen.

Ninth, one of the healings was on the Sabbath, while the other was not. Clearly, Jesus' healing is available to us anytime, 24/7. Whether it's a holy day of the week, a national holiday, or just another work or school day.

Ten, one of the healings angered the Jewish leaders, and the other didn't. Maybe it's because it wasn't on a Sabbath. Maybe it's because it happened in Galilee, far from the locus of religious and political power. The leaders in Jerusalem clearly considered Jesus a threat. And they were easily angered, to the point that after he healed the invalid, they wanted to have him

killed. But no amount of persecution, not even the threat of death, could deter Jesus from his sense of purpose. It appears from today's second story that nothing will stand in Jesus' way.

And eleventh, the official's son had a father who loved him, to say nothing of an entire family. The invalid had absolutely no one. He was completely, utterly alone. Or as he told Jesus, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." Again making it clear that no one is beyond the scope of Jesus' compassion. Even those who appear to be utterly alone.

Despite the differences between the two tales, we musn't overlook the similarities. In both of them, there was a need for healing of some kind, and a healing took place. In both of them, fullness of life was restored. In both, the mighty power of God was made manifest. In both, Jesus' identity as God's Son was revealed. In order that we may all simply believe.

It is not my intention today to say that Jesus will heal whatever we ask of him. That he will cause our cancer to just disappear, or give new strength to tired old legs. But neither can I say that any kind of healing is beyond Jesus' power or will, so we shouldn't even ask for it. The most honest thing I can say is that Jesus' ability to heal is beyond my ability to set limits on it or understand it. It may be that Jesus' heals us in ways too deep for us to understand.

Two things I can say with complete certainty, however. The first is that we all need healing, somewhere in our lives. And the second is that healing is precisely one of the miracles Jesus offers. To those in the Bible. To us. To those we love. To those we don't. And to those we don't even know.

Amen. (I will be offering anointing with oil in front here after the service, for anyone who wishes. When I ask you what it is you wish to be healed for, feel free to tell me, or to simply say "God knows.")

### **Questions for Pondering and Discussion**

What are some of the stories of Jesus or God healing someone that you have heard?

What are some of the ways that you have experienced healing in your own life?

Who are some of the outsiders or outcasts Jesus heals in the gospels? Who would their counterparts be today?

Who are some of the powerful or wealthy that we tend to treat as outsiders, as if they are beyond Jesus' healing reach?

What might be some of the hardest places or people for Jesus to reach?

Does it make a difference whether we or someone actually asks Jesus for healing? Why or why not?

Why are there so many healing stories in the Bible?

Does Jesus continue to heal people today?

Why did Jesus' healing of the man by the pool anger the religious leaders?

What was the original purpose of the Sabbath? Was it important enough to be a "law?" Do we need Sabbath laws today?

Who are some people you know that are almost entirely alone?

Did Jesus heal using his own power, or God's? Does it matter? Why or why not?