

Following and Healing  
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One interesting aspect of our story that we may not always remember though is that right after Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow him and fish for people and they immediately respond, Jesus gets to work right away. We read, "Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people." [2] There's hardly any transition at all from Jesus calling his first four disciples to performing the ministry to which he just called them. Matthew tells us in one quick sentence what Jesus and his movement are all about, even today--teaching, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and sickness among the people.

I don't know about you, but this whole discipleship deal is starting to feel pretty overwhelming. Last Sunday, we heard Jesus call his first disciples in the Gospel of John and Jesus encouraging the disciples to "come and see" this new thing Jesus was going to do with them by his side. I challenged us just a little bit to share our faiths, even if we may worship in one of the least exotic of places, and to ask ourselves why we are here in church and what is it that we yearn to come and see on our journeys of faith. Now we're talking about discipleship again in the Lectionary. If we're going to walk in the ways of Jesus, we may be encouraged to not just teach and not just proclaim, but to heal. Come on now.

Let's see if we can come to terms with Jesus' healing first and then we'll figure out how you and I are supposed to handle this next challenge of discipleship. Reza Aslan in *Zealot* has an excellent analysis of Jesus' healing ministry. In modernity, the stories of Jesus' healings, exorcisms, and all those miraculous activities are often one of the dividing lines between the historian and the skeptic versus the Christian or even the seeker. But what's fascinating is that while the earliest followers of Jesus argued about how to understand him--like the whole human and divine thing and whether or not he really was the Messiah, they never fought about Jesus' role as an exorcist, healer, and miracle worker.

All of the Gospels and the noncanonized scriptures confirm Jesus' miraculous deeds, including Q, the earliest source material we have in the Christian tradition. As Aslan states, "The early church not only maintained a vivid memory of Jesus' miracles, it built its very foundation upon them. . . Well into the second and third centuries, Jewish intellectuals and pagan philosophers who wrote treatises denouncing Christianity took Jesus' status as an exorcist and miracle worker for granted." [3] You see, the philosophers didn't like his teachings and the Jewish intellectuals didn't like some of his teachings or the fact that his followers proclaimed him Messiah. But neither group had any issue with Jesus being a miracle worker. Modern folks like us are the ones with the issue!

Jesus was notable in his historical context because he healed those in need for free. His ministry showed that the transformative love of God was available to all people. Best example--when the woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years reached out to Jesus for help, Mark tells us, "She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse." When she and Jesus speak, he says, "Daughter, your faith has made you well: go in peace, and be healed of your disease." [4] She didn't pay a single cent in order to be healed--she reached out her hands and touched Jesus' cloak and she is made well.

We debate health care all the time in our country, we especially debate the cost of health care and who should be paying and how much. If you go home and Google "Jesus and health care" you will find many opinions on how modern Christians think Jesus would react to current health care laws. Some cite the prophetic tradition, social justice and the obligation to care for the least of these, and that the signs Jesus performs to show that the kingdom of God is breaking forth were often connected to one's physical health. Others say that we should empower families to make health-care decisions. If folks can't afford health care, then public and private entities (like churches) should help those in need and wouldn't that be what Jesus would want the Church to do?[5]

As far as Jesus' healings go, Aslan reminds us that "with every leper cleansed, every paralytic healed, every demon cast out, Jesus was not only challenging that priestly code, he was invalidating the very purpose of the priesthood." [6] So with his healings, Jesus was going against the system of the priests having the power and authority to heal people and cleanse them of their sins. Simultaneously he was upsetting other supposed miracle workers who charged a whole lot of money to cure people who then got cleansed of their sins by priests. It was a two for one deal Jesus was performing for anyone who asked for his help. Not only did he heal them, but then he would declare them cleansed and new creations and beloved children of God. The deal was free and he healed people all the time--no wonder he got into trouble and there are so many search results for "Jesus and health care" today!

Jesus' beliefs about God's love being accessible for all people made him act in particular ways to bring his message home. Marcus Borg reminds us that, "The healings and exorcisms of Jesus are associated with the coming of the kingdom of God and a time of deliverance . . . healing as practiced by Jesus and his itinerant followers pointed to an unbrokered relationship to God." [7] Borg, being a Progressive Christian scholar, defines these actions of Jesus as paranormal healings and exorcisms--he will not call them miracles nor will he say they were psychosomatic. He says, "Inexplicable and remarkable things do happen, involving processes that we do not understand. I do not need to know the explanatory mechanism in order to affirm that paranormal healings happen. And Jesus seems to have been uncommonly good at them." [8] Many Progressive Christians keep Marcus Borg books right next to our Bibles so his explanation can maybe put us at ease. He won't call these activities Jesus performs miracles and he won't call them psychosomatic either, but he will call them paranormal and simply say that sometimes remarkable things happen when it comes to Jesus that we will just never understand.

So now that we have Jesus' healings figured out forever, let's ask ourselves how we can respond as disciples of Jesus in the modern world. If we are to follow in the footsteps of Christ, if we are to teach and proclaim the good news of the kingdom, and cure the people, well then what does this even look like? Especially if we're not talking about miracles or the whole psychosomatic deal and maybe we can't even figure out what paranormal healing means either!

One of our mission opportunities I consider when thinking of modern healing and discipleship is actually Cradles to Crayons. I've volunteered a few times by now with fellow Pilgrims in various configurations and we work at the Giving Factory in Brighton. At first glance, this is basic indirect service work. You clean and sort toys or inspect and sort books and clothing to give to children in need in the greater Boston area. We are there as a group in a big warehouse and it's not like you are interacting with the children Cradles serves. You can't directly see the impact your hours of service makes in the life of a child, and maybe that can be a good thing at times because maybe volunteering shouldn't be about us patting ourselves on the back anyway.

I'm always impressed at Volunteer Orientation with how earnestly the Volunteer Coordinators explain that they want those kids to be excited when they receive those items. And because we are not going to directly see this excitement, we have to imagine it. They don't want to give those kids shoes that have holes in them or shirts that are stained or toys that are broken or books that are already written inside. They want those kids to be excited and to feel special and loved, to feel that they are worth a whole lot no matter what. When any volunteer sorts, cleans, and inspects to help those items go to a child in need, isn't that a form of healing today? Just a little bit? No it's not healing some child from a disease or a wound. Or maybe it is. Because maybe we are healing a child's wounds that we just can't see on the surface. Let's be honest, we can't even see that wounded child. But there are always people to heal and always more healing to do. So maybe this whole discipleship deal doesn't end with you or me.

Now we cannot heal everybody, it's just not possible. Moreover there are some people who would rather sit in the darkness than come to the light. Jesus often asked people before he healed them--do you want to be made well? Some people in their heart of hearts do not want to be made well and they do not want to see Christ's light breaking forth in our world. Instead of getting discouraged, let's do as Jesus says and shake the dust off our feet and move on. So we do what we can. We heal the best we can. We live out these words we are just about to sing, "You need my hands, my exhaustion, working love for the rest of the weary--a love that's willing to go on loving. O Jesus, you have looked into my eyes; kindly smiling, you've called out my name. On the sand I have abandoned my small boat; now with you I will seek other seas." [9] Amen.

[1] Matthew 4:19, NRSV.

[2] Matthew 4:22-23, NRSV.

[3] Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, 105.

[4] Mark 5:26 and 34, NRSV.

[5] John Blake, "Would Jesus Support Health Care Reform?" CNN Religion Blogs, June 28, 2012, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/06/28/would-jesus-support-healthcare-reform/>

[6] Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, 112.

[7] Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, 67-68.

[8] Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, 66-67.

[9] You Have Come down to the Lakeshore," *The New Century Hymnal*, 173.

Today is another scripture passage about Christian discipleship. I better not have lost you already! This one's from the Gospel of Matthew--Jesus walking along the Sea of Galilee, calling out to Peter and Andrew on the seashore and then James and John in their fishing boat, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." [1] When I learned this story as a child it was even set to music with hand gestures, it's that famous.