

Luke 8:43-48

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. Then Jesus asked, 'Who touched me?' When all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you.' But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me.' When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.'

### **Faith Changes Everything**

"Your faith has made you well." How do we describe the faith of this woman? All of us would say that faith is important, but what do we mean when we say we have faith? What does Jesus mean when he tells this woman, "Your faith has made you well?"

Let's start by saying that this woman's faith had nothing to do with an afterlife. There are those who think of Jesus as a sort of clerk in a train station whose main function is to distribute tickets to the train to heaven. Such people are usually quite content with their life in this world, their biggest fear being that their lives have not been at all pleasing to God and therefore they need to profess "faith" in Jesus they will be issued a ticket. But this woman's faith had nothing to do with an afterlife. Her concern was about this life and the physical illness that had plagued her for twelve years. Her faith was in Jesus as the healer of the body, the One who she believed could make her whole.

And there are lots of people who come to Jesus to be made whole physically. Certainly those with afflictions or illnesses that threaten their lives or negatively impact their quality of life. Even a professing, card-carrying atheist would come to Jesus if there seems no other way to help them overcome whatever affliction they suffer – they could show up in a church and ask for prayer. And sometimes those prayers are answered in positive ways. Sometimes a person's faith in Jesus makes them well.

There are also those who come to Jesus in need of *spiritual* healing – the need to be freed from guilt or shame, or the need to be freed from hatred or the inability to forgive others; all of these are spiritual maladies that debilitate us. And many people come to church for this kind of healing.

But soul healing can take a lot longer than body healing, because soul healing is about ridding ourselves of sin, and that is usually if not always a lifelong endeavor. Too often people are healed of one or two particular illnesses of the soul and end the process – I have had people come to me because of an issue that they are having with a spouse or loved one, and once that relationship is healed I don't see them anymore, as if that was all the healing that was needed. The truth is that there are sicknesses and diseases of the soul that we are not conscious of; I recently went to a dentist who told me that I have a condition in the back right side of my mouth.

I said that I don't feel any pain and I don't experience any problems chewing, and he said that doesn't surprise him. If nerves are damaged we don't feel pain, so we don't think that there's anything wrong, BUT THERE IS. And just as the body masks pain so does the soul. We may create an environment that protects us from anything uncomfortable (which is why some people get upset with pastors, is because a pastor's job is not to simply make you feel comfortable).

There's something else that gets in the way of our spiritual healing; our fear of looking vulnerable. I took our bird Zazoo to a veterinarian for a checkup a while back, and the doctor told me that the bird was malnourished – we had been feeding him a cheap bird diet which wasn't giving Zazoo enough vitamins and minerals. I said that Zazoo acted "normal" for a parrot, and he said that was a way birds have adapted for survival, that if a sick or weak bird looks sick or weak the bird is more likely to be targeted by predators. Well humans are the same way; we don't want to appear weak or vulnerable to others, even when we are spiritually very ill. That can be a danger of becoming a leader in the church; when others recognize you as a leader you try not to show any weakness or doubt because you're afraid people will attack you for it.

Another way people hide their spiritual illness is somewhat ironic; they avoid church while claiming that they are very "spiritual." As they profess their spirituality they may simultaneously express their distaste for "organized religion." Well let me tell you; I'm no fan of organized religion (anyone who knows me well knows that I'm certainly not so organized, and I prefer to refer to my attachment to the church as a matter of *faith*, not religion). Anyone who has spent any time in church can find things they don't like, and people they don't like – you find a lot of crazy people in the church, but a person who retreats from church usually does so because they are uncomfortable about exposing their vulnerabilities to others. And in their spiritual isolation they can feel comfortable in whatever state they are in. But there is still healing that needs to happen in that person, and unless they open themselves to God and to others they will never get better.

Community is essential to our healing because God has created us to live in community. The kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims is a community, and it is God's perfect will that the kingdom of God should embrace ALL people – that's why Jesus instructs his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. We are not spiritually healed until our concerns are for those outside of ourselves and those who are familiar to us – Jesus says that if we love only those who love us, we are no different from sinners, which means that we are still spiritually sick and therefore require healing. The true sign of spiritual healing comes when we are able to get beyond ourselves and those who we find easy to love – our friends and our family. The true sign of spiritual healing is the love we have for those who are strangers to us, those who are different from us, those who we may even think of as enemies. And spiritual healing will prompt us to strive to make our enemies our friends.

And when the Holy Spirit works in us to endeavor to make our enemies friends, and interesting things happen. As we strive to know our enemies we find that really they're not much different from ourselves. They have the same wants, the same hopes, the same aspirations. They have mothers who love them and children who they love. And as our spiritual healing continues we may actually see our enemies as people who have unfulfilled needs. We may start to see that they want something that we have but don't want to share with them. And then we'll see that what has

caused us to label them as our enemies is our own unwillingness to give up something that we have and they don't...like the right to vote or the need to be recognized as human beings. I consider the Church to be force behind a lot of positive change that has occurred in this nation. Two obvious and somewhat recent changes are the abolition of slavery and a woman's right to vote. One of the great leaders of the abolitionist movement was William Lloyd Garrison who's mother was describes as being of strong religious character. Another was John Rankin, a Presbyterian minister. The Quakers, who were a strong religious sect also took the lead in the crusade to end slavery. And women like Susan B. Anthony, whose mother was a good Methodist and whose father had Quaker roots, was a leading figure in the women's suffragist movement. So out of the Church came leaders of social reform movements who worked to improve the lives of people and change the ingrained perceptions people had of blacks and women – to raise the public consciousness as to their full humanity and to endow them with the same rights and privileges that were offered to white males. And behind this whole movement was a spiritual healing of the human soul conducted by none other than Christ himself (one of the nuances of the story we read today is the way that Jesus doesn't just cure this woman of her bleeding; he affirms her humanity by commending her faith rather than chastising her for touching a priest in her condition and in healing her he restores her to the community, because according to Jewish law a woman who is bleeding is required to remain outside of the community because she is "unclean"). As we experience spiritual healing, we become active in these struggles to change perceptions and to raise people up and restore them into community.

Yet there is always pushback, and sadly some of that pushback comes from within the church. There have been plenty of pastors who have thrown those Bible passages around about *slaves obeying their masters* (which must mean that slavery is okay, right?) and women obeying their husbands and remaining quiet in the church (did you know that this church was designed with two front doors so that women could enter the right door and men *only* could enter the left door?). As I speak the United Methodist Church is holding a worldwide conference to determine if we will finally start treating the people we commonly refer to as gay as normal human beings whose sexual orientation does not make them sinners, and I have faith that the spirit of God will eventually prevail in this struggle as well. But there continues to be pushback.

My prayer for you today is that you will engage in this process of spiritual healing with zeal. Pretty soon it will be Lent, and I'm hoping that you don't just give up chocolate again for two months. I pray that you would take inventory of where you are in our walk of discipleship and where you may need some healing. I pray that you would be open to the work that God's Spirit wants to do within you. And I pray that this process will draw you closer not only to the people there but to the stranger, even to those you may consider your enemy. I pray that you would commit yourself to welcoming the work God is doing in you.