

“He laid his hands on her”

Luke 13:10-17

In all 4 gospels, Jesus is always healing. There are summaries of his general healing activity along with details of specific healing like in today’s gospel text.

The stage is set in verse 10. Jesus is teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath when a woman appears who has been crippled for 18 years. She was bent over and quite unable to stand up straight.

Jesus doesn’t wait for the woman to come to him, but calls her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment”.

“When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.” The leader of the synagogue criticizes Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Jesus responds by calling them hypocrites. You water your animals on the Sabbath so why can’t this woman who has suffered for so many years, be healed on the Sabbath? His opponents were put to shame and the crowd rejoiced at all the wonderful things he was doing.

Jesus healed a leper, a paralyzed slave, Peter’s fevered mother-in-law, two demoniacs, a woman with a hemorrhage, a dead girl, two blind men, a deaf man, a man with a withered hand, etc. The list goes on. What is the significance of these healings? What do they contribute to the gospel narrative of Jesus as the narrative?

Most explanations claim that the healings show Jesus to be divine. But the ability to heal does not make a person divine. Disciples are commissioned to heal and they are not divine. There were other healers in the Roman world about whom claims of divinity were not made.

So how might we understand these healings? Why are there so many sick folks in the gospels? We have to put these gospel stories of healing into the context of the first century and into the context of the structures and systems of the Roman Empire. The gospels, peopled with sick folks, mirrors the imperial world. Think about the parallels for today.

The Roman world was hierarchical with vast inequalities, economic exploitation, and political oppression. The hierarchy at the top, the top 2%, was comprised of ruling elites with varying degrees of wealth, power, and status. They were presided over by the emperor and very wealthy senators.

About 10% were part of a middle group with enough resources to enjoy a comfortable life. The bottom 88% lived near subsistence levels or below subsistence. 88% lived with little or no power, wealth, or status in varying degrees of poverty depending on the season of the year and what food was available.

These folks, whether urban or rural dwellers, were very vulnerable to all kinds of forces that could severely impact their lives: work availability, variable harvest yields, high prices, profiteering, war, irregular food and water supply, low wages, unsanitary and crowded living conditions, housing costs, taxes, natural disasters, etc.

In this imperial system, control of and access to good quantities of nutritionally adequate food reflected societal power and inequities.

Food was a sign of elite, conspicuous consumption and power. Food insecurity, the norm for most, reflected a lack of power, wealth, and status, making most people very vulnerable.

In theory, the Mediterranean diet—comprising mostly grains, beans, olives, and vine products—was reasonably healthy. But in practice, a lack of variety, poor nutritional quality, and variable supplies impacted by harvests, weather, poor transport and storage, seasonal variation and limited purchasing power frequently resulted in diets of inadequate nutrition.

A consequence of inadequate nutrition is disease. Poor nutrition results in lowered immunity and renders people more vulnerable to infectious diseases such as diarrhea, dysentery, cholera, typhus, meningitis, and scarlet fever.

Along with diseases of infection were diseases of deficiency. Peter Garnsey links Vitamin A deficiency, for example, with blindness, bone deformation, growth retardation, and lowered immunity. Vitamin C deficiency retards development of bones and teeth, as well as contributes to scurvy. Vitamin D deficiency causes muscle weakness and limits bone growth. Garnsey observes that for most people, life was a perpetual struggle for survival.”

In addition, congenital defects, injuries from accidents, poor hygiene systems, and a lack of knowledge about hygiene and medical care contributed to sick and disabled bodies.

Daily life was very stressful. Stress takes its toll on relationships and bodies, including decreased immunity. Symptoms such as muteness and paralysis can indicate people overwhelmed by power, by the trauma of domination. They can also be coping mechanisms of disengagement and distancing or self-protective protests through inactivity and non-compliance.

A sure sign of the lethal quality of life in Rome’s empire was a short average life expectancy of around 20 to 25 years.

For those who made it to age 10, there were perhaps another 35 years. Death rates were high. By one estimate, half of the infants who survived birth did not see their fifth birthday. Imperial power is bad for health.

It is not surprising, then that the gospels are peopled with sick folks.

The presence of so many sick people attests to the destructive impact of Roman power. Jesus' healings repair damage inflicted by imperial structures and systems. They rolled back negative effects of imperial hierarchies and systems that privileged powerful elites. Jesus' compassionate and merciful power confronts destructive imperial power. His healings expose the lie of imperial propaganda.

The gospel interprets Jesus' healing actions as manifestations and anticipations of God's new world, marked by God's life-giving purposes.

In Matthew 11:2-6, Jesus tells John's disciples, "Go tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk." Jesus explains his actions by referring to verses from the prophet Isaiah (26:19, 29:18-19, and 35:5-6).

These passages envision the establishment of God's reign/empire that creates a world marked by bodily health and wholeness. Other passages, such as Isaiah 25:6-10, anticipate that this coming world will feature abundant food and the end of death, tears, and disgrace.

By citing Isaiah's vision, Jesus indicates that his healings begin to manifest this new world in which God's reign/empire prevails.

Jesus' healings display God's reign/empire in the midst of Rome's empire. His healings are signs or displays that embody God's transforming reign/empire in the present moment.

They do not manifest the fullness of God's reign/empire yet, but anticipate this coming future when God's empire will be fully realized.

None of this provides a blueprint for sickness and healing in our contemporary setting. But it does suggest some implications for embodying the divine reign/empire in our present day.

One is the strong affirmation that healthy bodies matter. The gospel narrates the compassionate and merciful repair of some bodies to effect well-being and wholeness.

A second implication recognizes health and societal connections. Unjust and oppressive imperial structures, practices, and conditions impact the physical and mental well-being of their inhabitants. Attention to – and reform of – destructive societal structures matter. Thus we met two weeks ago in our courtyard to discuss another option to warehousing our mentally ill and drug addicted in our county jail.

Third is the issue of accessibility. The healing scenes in Matthew bring to the foreground folks who occupied social margins. Sick and disabled folks were at times mocked and not as valued as able-bodied folks who could contribute to households through work. Yet Jesus is accessible to heal anyone. Unlike other sources of healing, such as doctors or cultic sites or shrines, Jesus' healing did not require the sick and caregivers to undertake lengthy and expensive travel to a sacred site. No one pays Jesus a premium for healing.

Fourth, this healing task is entrusted to – and continues through – Jesus' disciples (10:7-8). The healings in the gospels were psychological, material, physical, and societal. By employing a “now and not yet” perspective, the gospel does not guarantee universal healing. Our present times do offer much unfinished, divine work, for the healing of bodies and nations.

We are sent out to do that unfinished work. It is through our personal healing that Jesus sends us out to be healers in our families, in our church, in our communities and in our world. Jesus sends us out to be his healing presence.

Sometimes we find our families, or our church, or our community, or our nation bleeding internally, or paralyzed, or bent over in pain. We need to believe there is healing for all those hurting people out there.

Two weeks ago, Bill Franz e-mailed our church, asking me to call him.

This was his message: “This is Bill Franz, Bob Maas’ son-in-law. I have pancreatic cancer. Can Pastor Doug please contact my wife Lynn to help with some questions.”

I called Lynn who invited me to their gorgeous home on 2 acres in Valley City on August 13th. Hospice was coming to their house, he was on morphine, but sitting up in his easy chair, I listened to his story for an hour and a half. Bill began with these words, “I’ve lived a great life. I’ve worked hard so I could play hard.”

Bill and Lynn have been blessed with 3 children in their 30’s and 5 grandchildren, two of which were born in June. Bill died a few days later having just turned 61. I’ll be presiding at his funeral next Sunday afternoon.

Before I left his house, we celebrated Holy Communion together. Bill was spiritually healed before moving on.

There is only one power, one loving God of the universe, one healing force.

If it reaches to us here, why not to every person? Why not to every situation? We need to go out and share Christ’s healing presence in all of our relationships, everyday.