

Treasures in Heaven, Part 2: The Brain Center and Other Healing Ministries

March 14, 2021

My topic today is health and healing. We have all been living through a horrific experience of pandemic, illness, dying, and isolation—and we need some balm in Gilead, some comfort to assuage our grieving and to secure a stable sense of the future. It has been a very tough road we have been on.

And I'm mindful that by now many of you will know that on Thursday, at Common Ministry, I submitted a letter of resignation from my position as Minister of Faith Formation and Community Engagement, effective June 1. It was not an easy decision to reach. I have learned to love you, church, and I have poured my heart and soul into our collective work. It has been a great joy and privilege to work among you. I will always be grateful for these three years at Union.

But I am also aware that my departure means that there are dreams that will now not be realized—relationships that will invariably change. I am sorry for this disruption—in a season of disruption. But for the past six months, my vocation as a scholar and professor has been tugging at me insistently, and the Seminary in Philadelphia has invited me to return to teaching and research full time. Lisa and I will remain in Wisconsin—and so I do hope to keep in touch, but I will also be on the road a good bit, as conditions allow, with open invitations in many places around the globe. God is calling me into the work of speaking out on behalf of refugees from and political prisoners in Turkey, and on behalf of peacebuilding initiatives that cut across our historic traditions. I hope you understand, and I ask for your prayers. I will be active among you for the next two-and-half months, and I will happily help with any transition planning.

So, for today our topic is healing—and how God will bind up all wounds, heal us from our suffering, and strengthen us for the future.

Our first reading for today, from the Book of Numbers, is about as perfect a reading for a pandemic as you can get. It's the story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan, grumbling as they go, and then being beset by poisonous, biting snakes. The grumbling itself might be the problem—God knows people can be like snakes when they get upset with each other, right? But I think the snakes in this story are in fact deadly. The people of Israel are realizing that they are dying in the wilderness: 40 years is a long time. Some of them have already died. Some of them are realizing that they will not get to see the Promised Land; they will die, instead. And the fear of death is like a snake that threatens to poison all of us.

So, Moses and Aaron and (we can imagine) Miriam set up a bronze snake wrapped around a pole. You probably recognize this as the Rod of Asclepius or the Caduceus—as it is sometimes called, that has become the symbol of the medical profession around the world. (And in an interesting aside—the Caduceus has two snakes and wings—since it was a symbol of the god Mercury. Our story for today is more like the symbol of the healing god Asclepius—whose rod only has one snake, and which probably arose from an ancient Sumerian symbol—the Sumerians were among the people who inhabited Canaan before the Israelites arrived.) In any event, we

have a confusion about these two different symbols—they are often interchanged, which is at least an interesting quirk in symbolology.

But I'm convinced that what we have in this symbol of the snake on a pole hearkens back to the book of Genesis, where that snake in the Garden of Eden opens the eyes of the first couple and they recognize their nakedness, their vulnerability. The fear of death arises, as it has among the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness. And, interestingly, the cure is the same in both cases: by looking at that snake—by facing the fear of death—healing begins. This ancient vaccine, for that is what it is, points our way in healing, too. Get the vaccine; and get your family and friends to do so. Please.

For it is a piece of the poison that infects us that will also heal us. Put another way: It is going THROUGH the fear of death that we heal from all fear. It is through conflict and difference that we gain understanding. It is through struggle that we reach growth. It is through grief that we find acceptance. It is through death, a cross even, that we find new life. And this new life is as real as when a snake sheds its skin and becomes a new creature. This new life, this health, is as real as when we shed our skins, which we do every 2 to 4 weeks, according to scientists, and become, in fact, a new creature.

In short, my siblings in Christ, ego is the illusion. Ego—the idea that there is the “I,” this “individual,” who needs to be protected and defended—is the barrier to recognizing the grace that saves us all. Ego—this all-absorbing “I” that manifests itself so often in self-righteousness and judgement—is the obstacle that keeps us from realizing the gift of life, in this moment, now. Ego is the illness that tries to control the uncontrollable and that, far from bringing us freedom (because control is the opposite of freedom), traps us in fear and anxiety. Ego—the I AM that asserts my prerogatives, my independence, my way—is the disease that keeps us all from flourishing, here at Union and all over the world. From ego flows a panoply of demons—greed, lust, anger, covetousness, resentment, manipulation—all of which separate and divide us and keep us from flourishing, like the lilies of the field which are more beautiful than even Solomon in his splendor.

Which brings us to our gospel reading for today. There's power in possessions, isn't there? Let's acknowledge that. We all trust in our stuff, more or less. It's the American way. Many years ago, the sociologist Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* made it plain that after the Reformation and Industrial Revolution, corporations (which churches themselves became, of course) began replacing heaven with capital, with stuff, with displays of conspicuous consumption. Our church building, in fact, is a testament to this temptation. Beautiful as it is, our building is also an example of ego when it does not also engage us in service to our neighbors. When we care more about how we're dressed, or what we eat, or WHERE we worship than WHO, then ego is asserting itself once again. But I digress....

As Jesus spoke to his audience in the first century CE, he could take for granted that the people he spoke with were living in a society riddled by systemic inequality. For nearly a century, during the so-called “Augustan” age of the Pax Romana, the rich had been getting richer and the poor getting poorer. People in Jesus' audience were being taxed to the max, as the Tower of Power song puts it. Many of them lost their lands. Many of them had to resort to being day laborers—like those in another of Jesus parables, depending from day to day upon the whims of overlords to hire them and pay them for their daily bread.

So, this story of the rich fool has more than a touch of revenge in it, doesn't it? It would feel good to Jesus' listeners to hear God say to the capitalist farmer who kept building his CAFO larger, and larger, and larger: "You Fool! This night your soul is required of you!"

And there's that fear of death again, right? If we are possessed by our possessions, you can be sure that if our soul is required of us, we'll take it as BAD NEWS. We'll lose our stuff! It's not just the dude in the parable who's stuck in ego, is it? It's Jesus' listeners, too—because there's power in possessions, and we find ourselves desiring that bigger barn too, don't we? So it's not just Jesus' listeners who are stuck in ego—it's us.

Jesus then transitions to his message of healing, one of my favorites in all of Scripture. "Consider the lilies," he simply says, or as I put it in an earlier sermon on this passage among you, "Consider the dandelions."

I won't repeat what I said back then, but instead I want to share just a bit about how important healing has been in the history of Christianity. What Jesus is healing here is anxiety—once again, the fear of death. That fear is wrapped up in all of the worries we take on—about food, clothing, employment, home, our children or parents, and on, and on, and on. Every worry resolves to the same worry.

So, Jesus gives us some non-anxious examples. Take ravens—or any bird for that matter. Take lilies—or any beautiful plant. Do ravens worry? I wonder. Do lilies? I think so, actually. Have you seen stress on plants? I have. Do we see stress on plants as climate change becomes more real? I think so.

In other words, we probably need to revise Jesus a little bit here, do some midrash, in order to hear the good news of God's infinite healing power. God loves the ravens, and the lilies, and doesn't want them stressing. And God loves us, too, and doesn't want us stressing, either.

So, what's the healing alternative to that fear that triggers worry? Consider the lilies. As Jesus puts it, bluntly, they will one day wither and die, like us. It is through the cross that we find resurrection power; through death that new life begins.

Healing is like that, too, I believe. Christians have actually been at the forefront of creating healing institutions. There's been a great deal of recent scholarship on the long relationship between Christians and healing, and I won't trace 2,000 years for you today (for which if we were together I'd ask you to say, "Amen!")

But it's important to know that our ancestors put care for the sick and suffering into practice. It started in ancient Rome, where there were very few polices or practices in place to care for the sick. As church historian Philip Schaff put it: "The old Roman world was a world without charity." So, following the example of Jesus, who taught people to care for the "least among them," including explicitly to care for the sick, Christians began to develop hospitals or hospices. These were both way-stations for travelers and places for the sick to receive comfort and treatment.

The largest of these Christian hospitals eventually developed in Constantinople, today's Istanbul. It was called the Pantokrator Hospital, the All-Ruler hospital. The Pantokrator is the image of Jesus that is usually in the very peak of the dome of any Orthodox church, including Aya Sophia

in Istanbul. Anyway—this Pantokrator Hospital founded by Christians in Constantinople had five wards, five pharmacists, five laundry women, a couple of cooks, specialists in various kinds of surgery, and so on—you get the picture!

This kind of institution differed from the usual Roman hospitals—which did not exist. Instead, the sick would go to the Temple of Isis, Serapis, or Asclepius, usually, of which there was one in almost every city—there surely would have been one in a city the size of Green Bay. At these temples the supplicant would offer a sacrifice of some kind, and the patient would then be allowed to spend a night in the temple, in what was called the abaton, or most sacred space, where it was hoped Asclepius would appear to heal them. Sometimes, according to inscriptions, this actually happened—in the same way, one can suppose, that placebos sometimes produce good effects on those who take them.

But Christians took a different, more practical, approach. Based in the notion that Jesus was incarnate in the flesh, and that Christians were to care for their body as a temple of the Living Spirit, and that the body was the very image of God, Christians began developing places of comfort for the sick, incorporating medicine as it was practiced then. Aristotle had, of course, developed an entire physics, and Hippocrates gave us the oath still used in medicine today—“do no harm.” But it was Christians, following the example of Jesus’ teaching in the parable of the Good Samaritan, and following the example of Jesus’ many acts of healing, who put care for the sick, for ANYONE who was sick, into practice in practical ways.

As Christians began moving out of their synagogues and homes, and began building their own churches, hospitals were originally added as a wing of the church. Healing was as vital, in other words, as worship.

And so, when plagues came, which they did frequently in the ancient world, guess who were the people who cared for others through, during, and after the plague? Eusebius, the 4th century historian of the church, described what happened when a plague and resultant famine hit during the reign of the Emperor Maximinius, who ruled from 303-313: “Christians alone in the midst of such ills showed their sympathy and humanity by their deeds. Every day some continued caring for and burying the dead, for there were multitudes who had no one to care for them; others collected in one place those who were afflicted by the famine, throughout the entire city, and gave bread to them all.” Is it surprising, then, that the Emperor to follow Maximinius, who was in fact Maximinius’ rival, Constantine the Great, became a Christian?

And, who do you think were the staff and volunteers in those early Christian hospitals? The office of deacon was one of the earliest in the history of the church. There were three chief offices in the church that developed very early: bishops (administrators), presbyters (preachers and presiders), and deacons (literally, servers). And we know from many sources that deacons (and probably presbyters, too) were often women. So, Deaconesses, if we want to use the gendered description, baptized, preached, taught, and ministered to the sick. It has been thus ever since. Every nurse takes root, historically, in the office of deacon in the history of Christianity. This kind of gender equality—work for women out from under the villa of the pater familias—was a huge step in human history. And that push toward gender equality came directly from the freedom that Christ offered to all; the freedom from fear; the freedom from the fear of death.

Gradually, then, Christians began to earn a reputation for charity that faced death squarely, and that cared for those who were facing death—the sick and dying. Indeed, I believe it was this fearless caring for the sick and dying that led Christianity to grow, even more than martyrdom—which was actually quite rare and sporadic in the first three centuries of Christianity’s existence (although, truth be told, the fearlessness with which a few Christians endured martyrdom came from the same root as the courage that many more demonstrated in caring for the sick and dying—no fear of death).

Most healthcare in the Roman world—indeed, most health care until very recently—was palliative; that is, the only thing that could be done in many if not most cases was to comfort the person dying, rather than to cure disease. And yet the lesson Christians learned from this attention to the sick and dying was put like this by the Bishop Cyprian of Carthage in Northern Africa, in an essay entitled “On Mortality,” written during a plague in the year 251 CE:

Beloved brothers and sisters, what a great thing it is, how pertinent, how necessary, that a pestilence and plague which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the righteousness of each one, and examines the minds of the human race, to see whether they who are in health tend to the sick; whether physicians do not forsake the beseeching patients; whether the fierce suppress their violence; whether the rapacious can quench the ever insatiable ardor of their raging avarice even by the fear of death; whether the haughty bend the neck; whether the wicked soften their boldness...

And so even if this mortality conferred nothing else, it has granted this benefit to Christians and to God’s servants, that we begin ... to learn not to fear death.

This is, of course, the lesson of a lifetime—to learn not to fear death, and Christians have been learning it across the centuries and through millennia, more or less effectively. But as historian of medicine Henry Sigerist put it, Christianity introduced “the most revolutionary and decisive change in the attitude of society toward the sick,” giving sick people a “preferential position” in society. And, if you’d like to read more about this history, go online and check out Amanda Porterfield’s “Healing in the History of Christianity,” Morton Kelsey’s “Christianity and Healing” (a classic), and for a shorter intro, see Christian History, issue 101, which is a great little survey by excellent scholars.

All in all, then, this idea that sick people have a “preferential position” to receive our compassion is central to being a Christian. This is why we pray for the sick each week because when we remember them we are, in fact, being “rich toward God,” as Jesus put it in our parable for today, because God suffers with anyone who is suffering! When we pray for the sick, when we remember those who are suffering, and when we work to alleviate that suffering, insofar as possible, we are living for a “treasure in heaven that does not rust,” as Jesus put it in another apt image. And it is this spirit of being rich toward God, of living for a treasure in heaven, of alleviating suffering insofar as possible that is behind and at the core of the Brain Center of Green Bay, growing in our basement.

For a couple of centuries now, it is unfortunate how the connection between Christianity and healing has been allowed to attenuate. We have embraced science in medicine, gratefully, thankfully, but we have often failed as Christians to realize how that embrace of science need not

be apart from our Christianity, but in fact is and can be its very expression. We go to doctors because we are Christians, not in spite of that fact. We take that vaccine because we are Christians, not in spite of that fact. We embrace true healing by taking into ourselves a bit of the poison that heals us, overcoming thereby nothing less than the fear of death and contributing to a world where others do not have to live in fear or isolation, either. And that, my friends in Christ, is a miracle as amazing as that one recorded in the book of Numbers.

All in all, the cumulative effect of Jesus' life and teaching is that healing matters, healing is possible, healing is salvation. This is not the magic of a visit to the Temple of Asclepius. Instead, we work together to forge policies that promote public health because as Christians, anyone who is sick is a challenge to our Christian call to compassion. We work together to advance excellence in science because as Christians, we remember the vaccination of the people of Israel in the wilderness and we commit ourselves to following the same course. We work together, as the acronym for the work of the Brain Center of Green Bay puts it, to CARE—to collaborate, advocate, research, and educate—about brain health and all kind of health—physical, mental, and spiritual—because they all relate to our faith where we care for persons, as God cares for us.

My siblings in Christ, we have endured this season of plague, and we have the prospect of healing before us. We lament those we have lost. We grieve for the changes that this pandemic has wrought. We pine for the moments that can never be recovered. We long for the way things were, but know in our hearts that the way things were is the way things can never be because life and death intertwine like that snake around the pole, and while love endures, the lily also fades and dies.

And yet we find strength, as did Christians in the time of Cyprian, in our collective commitments. We find strength, as did Christians in the time of Eusebius, in the gifts of God, for the people of God. We find strength, as did all those women deacons and nuns and nurses in our past, when we give ourselves away in loving service to others. We find strength, as did Jesus of Nazareth did when he faced the wrath of Empire, when we lose the ego that mires us down in control. We find strength, as did Jesus when he triumphed over the Empire's torture and crucifixion, when we throw ourselves into love beyond and through the fear of death. That victory, that healing, that salvation is ours, too. For God is a God of life, beyond all wounds and pain and suffering, with us in each moment—encouraging us, holding us, crying with us, laughing with us, liberating us from all fear.

May this be so among us, in the Brain Center of Green Bay, and in all the ways we can serve through Union, through our families, through our vocations—wherever they may take us. Amen.

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