

“Healing on Demand”
Mark 5:21-43
Andrew Foster Connors
13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 28, 2009

I wonder how long it takes to learn how to ask for what you really need. After twelve years of hurting, you would think that the hemorrhaging woman would have figured it out. After twelve years of health care bills that took everything she had, you would think that this woman would have walked right up to Jesus and said directly – I’ve been hurting for twelve years and I need to be healed. It’s not like Jesus was her first attempt at pain relief. She had already been poked and prodded by more than one specialist. She had spent every last dime. Obviously she had advocated for herself many times before this one. And yet when the moment came, when the healer of the hour arrived, she snuck up behind him hoping to steal the healing that she wanted.

Maybe when she woke up that morning, she had planned to come up to Jesus and ask him more directly for the healing she wanted. Maybe as she dressed that morning, she thought to herself, “today the teacher I have heard about is coming to my town and I will ask him for the healing that has left me hurting and penniless. Today I will ask him for the healing that I need.” Maybe she had planned to ask for what she needed until she crested the hill by the sea and saw how small she was in the great crowd that had gathered.

Until she heard Jairus, the synagogue leader pleading with Jesus – “please come heal my little girl. Without you, she’ll die. Please come now. Please come.” Maybe she thought to herself, “my need is not as great as the need of that little girl. Yes, I’ve lived for twelve long years with this bleeding. But she’s only been alive for twelve years. Her need is more compelling than mine. Her need is more deserving than mine.”

Maybe that’s the comparison the hemorrhaging woman made in her head as she blended into the crowd that day. Or maybe she had already decided before she arrived that morning that she wasn’t faithful enough to deserve to ask for any healing from God. She hadn’t served on enough committees at the synagogue. She didn’t pray enough. She didn’t pledge enough. She hadn’t volunteered enough that year. She hadn’t given any time. She hadn’t studied her sacred texts. Who did she think she was to ask Jesus for anything when she hadn’t done anything to deserve it? Maybe she had decided that she had not done enough to deserve Jesus’ healing.

One way or another she must have felt that she didn’t deserve to ask for the kind of healing that she desired so deeply. She didn’t feel she could openly ask for what she needed. She didn’t feel that she could approach Jesus with her own needs, her own desires, her own hopes, her own losses. She didn’t think they were as valuable, or as needy, or as deserving as the people around her.

It’s a comparison that we make all the time. Sure I’ve got problems but they’re not as bad as so and so. Yes, I’m going in for surgery but I don’t think my problem is big enough to go on the prayer list. Why should I ask for anything from God for myself when there are children

dying in Iraq, or activists disappearing in El Salvador, or children right here in Baltimore who have to dodge armed gang members every time they leave their home. My problem isn't big enough to make it on God's priority list. My needs are not urgent enough. My issues not substantial enough. My dreams not desperate enough. Who am I to ask God for anything when I haven't served as much as I ought to, or done as much as others, or been as faithful as so and so?

If that's the comparison we have to make, most of us will never make it high on the list of God's most deserving. There are plenty of people whose loss is greater than mine. I can always find someone whose needs are greater than mine. I can always find someone whose heartache is deeper than mine. There's always someone in the village who's higher up on the priority list than I will ever be. There's always someone who's more deserving than I will ever be. There's always someone who's more faithful than I will ever be.

When you feel that your needs, your dreams, your desires aren't important enough or deserving enough to be made a priority then you'll either shelve them or try to get them met another way. That's what the hemorrhaging woman does – she tries to steal healing from Jesus. Sneaks up and tries to touch his cloak. Tries to get what she needs without ever asking for it. Tries to get what she needs by hiding it. Tries to get what she needs by stealing healing from Jesus.

But Jesus isn't making any comparisons. The grace of God isn't a zero sum game. Healing one doesn't mean *not* healing another. Giving time to one doesn't mean less time for another. *There's enough healing to go around.* The bleeding woman is as much of a daughter of God as the little girl. Jesus has enough time for both. Jesus has enough healing power for both. Jesus has enough love for both. Jesus won't choose between the two.

I suppose that's all well and good for the two daughters in this story. Healing comes to them. Life comes to them. Grace comes to them. But where we live, not everyone who asks for what they need gets the kind of healing that they are looking for. Not every person receives the healing they beg for. Not everyone gets up off their death bed and walks away.

And yet nobody in this story gets healed the way they expect. Nobody in this story gets exactly what she asks for. The hemorrhaging woman struggles for twelve years before healing comes to her. And even then she discovers that the real healing that Jesus has to offer is not just end of bleeding but the healing that comes when you know that you are loved. Jesus calls her daughter, speaks to her directly, acknowledges her as a human being who is worthy of her desire for life. "Go in peace," he tells her, "and be healed of your disease." The synagogue leader was praying for healing that would keep his daughter alive. But he doesn't get to avoid the agony of death. Grace doesn't come to him until after his daughter is already gone. Only then does Jesus say before a small, but stunned group, "Little girl, get up." Nobody in this story gets healed the way they expect.

Maybe that's the way most healing comes. On a timeline that's longer than you want. Healing that's different than what you thought you needed. Healing that doesn't come like you want it, when you want it, or how you want it. Maybe that's the way most healing comes.

Shane Claiborne spoke recently on the radio program *Speaking of Faith* about a married couple that he visited.¹

And they told him, 'We were unable to have children as a married couple.' They were about 50 years old. And they said, 'But then we were walking through our neighborhood and we met this woman who had found herself homeless and she was six months pregnant. And so we said, "My gosh, you know, you got, you can't be on the streets." So they brought her back to their house and said, 'You know, we'll figure this out as we go.' And they really hit it off together. And they said, 'If you want to have your child while you're living here with us, we would love to be a part of that process because we've always wanted to have a child. And so, she did. She had her child there, living in their home.

And they continued to live together and raise the child. And then, they said to this mother, they said, 'Well, what are *your* dreams? We're getting to live out one of ours.' And she said, 'I've always wanted to go to nursing school.' So they said, 'Well, we will take care of your child and help you financially if you want to go to nursing school,' and so she did. They've lived together now for over 10 years. And Shane went back to visit them recently. The woman who's formerly homeless is a nurse. That little girl that she had is almost a teenager now. And the amazing thing is that the woman of that married couple now has multiple sclerosis and she's dying, but she's got a nurse living in her home with her, taking care of her when she dies.

So I don't know *how* healing comes. Or why it sometimes takes years, twelve years, or why at other times it still hasn't seemed to arrive at all. All I know is that healing for this God is not a zero sum game. God seems to have plenty of love, and plenty of healing, and plenty of compassion to go around. This God wants to be a healer not just of bodies but a healer of whole persons. This God wants to be a giver of grace. This God wants to hear the wounds of people who hope for more for themselves and for their neighbors.

And with a God like that you don't have to steal healing for your deepest wounds. You don't have to sneak up on God to get what you really want. You don't have to earn your way to the top of the priority list. You don't have to hide your needs, your desires, your dreams because they may not be as deserving as someone else's. God has enough healing to go around. There's more than enough love to go around.

You are still known to God even when you think you don't deserve a hearing. You are loved by God, named as daughter or as son. I wonder how long it takes to learn how to ask for what you really need. To no longer see your own needs in competition with those of others, but to see God's reckless, infinite love as the foundation for the healing of the world. God has more than enough love, more than enough healing, more than enough grace to go around.

¹ *Speaking of Faith* with Krisa Tippett, "The New Monastics: A Conversation with Shane Claiborne," May 10, 2007, <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/newmonastics/index.shtml>.