

Healing Faith (Luke 17.11-19)

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‘Your faith has made you well’ (Luke 17.19). I wonder what happens for you as you hear these words? For me, I confess, they set off a bunch of pastoral alarm bells. I think of people of faith who are profoundly distressed when Jesus’ promise of healing seems unrealised in their experience. And of those whose ‘Christian’ community has judged them to lack faith, because they or a loved one suffers chronic or terminal illness. I think of the spiritual abuse, despair and self-loathing that can follow. Jesus told his disciples if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they could move mountains (Matthew 17.20-21). But what if the mountain I’m interested in doesn’t move? Does it mean I’m doing something wrong? If Jesus could heal ten largely ungrateful lepers at a distance, why won’t he heal me? If he could answer Jairus’s plea on behalf of his daughter, why won’t he relieve the suffering of my daughter or son or grandchild or spouse? That’s one set of questions.

If I sit with these, however, I’ve discovered that they lead me to a further, more theological question, which is this: what’s faith got to do with it anyway? What is it about the disposition and exercise of faith that is supposed to lead to healing? Is it that God is in the business of rewarding unquestioning adherents, just as a feudal lord might bestow special benefits on his most loyal and favourite subjects? Or is there something more subtle going on? Is there something internal to the practise of faith that is ultimately healing for human beings? Four times in Luke’s gospel, Jesus speaks this formula. ‘Your faith has made you well’. ‘Your faith has saved you’. What’s he really saying?

Let’s start with the story we’re in. The so-called ‘cleansing of the ten lepers’ is located on Jesus’ long Lukan journey to Jerusalem. This is a journey that will culminate in his death, resurrection and ascension, and that, along the way, provides a vast range of opportunities for him to mix with people, to heal, teach and challenge

pre-conceptions.¹ As the story begins, we're told, he's 'in the region between Samaria and Galilee', which is to say *between* Samaritan and Jewish territory, a 'liminal space', a kind of 'no man's land'.² He enters a village and is approached by ten lepers who nevertheless (as the Law requires) keep their distance. They are, it seems, a small band of outcasts – separated by the contagion of their disease from normal society (Lev. 13.46), yet finding company in one another. They call out to Jesus for 'mercy' and, seeing them, he tells them to 'Go and show yourselves to the priests'.

This is an instance of what philosophers call a 'suppressed premise'. Jesus' words seem initially a non-sequitur, a kind of non-response to their plea. They ask him for mercy, and he sends them elsewhere. But what Jesus and they know is that if healed lepers are to be certified as such and so accepted back into society, they must undergo a priestly examination and ritual (Lev.14.1-32).³ What is thus assumed in Jesus' instruction to 'go show yourselves' is his 'yes' to their cry.

And already, it seems to me that this story gives us two clues about the connection between faith or trust in God and the possibility of healing. First, these lepers have trust enough in God's mercy to be willing to acknowledge their need. They are humble enough, perhaps desperate enough, to show themselves to Jesus without any pretence they can provide for themselves out of their own resources, and without any illusions they've got this 'handled'. This doesn't imply any self-flagellation. The lepers in this story don't blame themselves for their plight, nor do they repent of their sins. They're simply honest about their longing and need.

Second, they are willing to act 'in faith'; that is, to do what Jesus tells them in advance of any evidence that their situation has changed. I don't imagine they were completely free of doubt as they set off to visit the priests. But what else were they going to do? This looked like their best shot, and they were willing to step into Jesus'

¹ See David Neville, 'The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me: Preaching from Luke in Year C', *St Mark's Review*, No. 213 (3) (July 2010), pp.57-70, p.64.

² Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), p.256.

³ Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Books, 1996), p.257.

words without any clear guarantee of an outcome. And 'As they went, they were made clean' (Luke 17.14).

Earlier I asked, what is it about the practice of faith, about entrusting ourselves to God, that's connected with healing for human beings. This story suggests it's not about being rewarded for dogged belief or special piety. Rather it suggests that something is enabled – some possibility of newness – when we acknowledge need and give up pretence of self-sufficiency; when we step into God's leading (as best we discern it) in advance of certainty. Faith, on this account, involves a disposition of open-ness and humility, a receptivity to grace and a listening beyond ourselves. The wellness Jesus promises is a fruit of deepening of connection.

An important feature of this passage is that the happy outcome of leprosy cleansed is not the end of it. Indeed, commentator Robert Tannehill notes that the emphasis is not primarily on the fact of physical healing, but on the return of one of the lepers to give thanks. Obviously, part of what's significant here is the ethnicity of the grateful leper. The audience isn't told he's a Samaritan, a foreigner, until late in the piece, so 'hearers are allowed to form a positive impression of the man's response before the ethnic factor is introduced. For some the result would be a disturbing challenge to their negative stereotype of Samaritans'.⁴ Luke is communicating that the healing promised and the faith Jesus commends are available to all.

But something else seems to be going on as well. A link seems to be drawn between his praise or thankfulness, and a practice of faith that is truly healing. All ten lepers had exhibited the disposition of faith to some extent. All had reached out for help and all of them acted on Jesus' words in the face of unknowing. But only the Samaritan seems fully to recognise the meaning of his healing and the response proper to it. Says Luke, 'when he saw that he was healed, [he] turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him'. The other nine have apparently just gone on their way, their initial trust in Jesus'

⁴ Tannehill, *Luke*, p.258.

goodness vindicated but a fuller connection missed. For the Samaritan, however, his faith 'has blossomed into joyful praise' and it's in response to his whole-hearted, self-forgetful return that Jesus exclaims 'Your faith has made you well'. As if he's healed now of more than just his leprosy; as if being truly well is about recognising and enjoying the action of God in your life, such that your whole life is changed, re-oriented, re-integrated.

Of course, what may remain difficult for us is that, in the story, although the Samaritan's wellness is not equated merely with the cure of his disease, it does include it. Easy enough, you might say, to give thanks for God's mercy when you get what you want. So what does it mean to speak of healing faith, the faith that makes us well, when we or our loved ones aren't relieved of illness or pain, when we seem to receive no answer to our pleas for mercy? There can be no glib or easy response to such questions; they'll be raised again for us by our reading next week.

But it does seem to me that, even in the face of chronic or intractable suffering, the fundamental dispositions of faith – humility and listening, expectancy of goodness and readiness to be thankful – these do constitute a more healing way of being in the world and of reconciling the ill we undergo. When we're hurting, disappointed, frightened, despairing, when God seems silent and we have no sense of presence, keeping faith in this sense can be profoundly difficult. Even so, I believe this is the practice that keeps us open to connection, to possibility, to gift, no matter what befalls. How do we come to know this? It's as we give ourselves to this way, and find ourselves made well as we go.