

### “A Time to Be Healed”

I’m trying not to talk about this too much; I mean, who really wants to hear about it? But I’ve got a new phone. Priscilla curls her lip when she talks about it. She calls it my “toy,” and she thinks it’s pretty excessive. Probably she’s right... she usually is. But, man, is it cool!

With a flick of my thumb I can watch animated weather radar. I know what the weather is doing in Washington, D.C. and Grand Forks, North Dakota, where our kids live. I can check the baseball scores which are updated continuously to see if the Pirates have lost a hundred games yet.

When I went to the State Fair earlier this week I downloaded this thing from the Des Moines Register that listed all the different kinds of fair food that are available and where they’re all located. Accessing the web I can read up on the week’s lectionary readings. There are apps you can download that will mimic the sounds of various bodily functions. My calendar is all transferred over from my Palm Pilot. When I tap on the place an event is to be held it will pop up on a map; tap it again and I can get turn by turn spoken directions from wherever I happen to be to wherever the event is.

I can shoot pictures or video. I can play music or watch TV. I can verbally give my phone the ET command—“phone home!”—and it will. I told myself I would learn to use this thing, and slowly but surely, I’m doing it.

Then on Thursday a really weird thing happened. Somebody called me, and I had no idea what to do. I pushed all the buttons and started up a dozen apps and took pictures of the ceiling while my caller ended up leaving a message on my voice mail. Please don’t tell Priscilla. She’s working this morning. It would only bring her grief. Let’s just let this be our little secret.

Oddly enough what got me thinking about my phone was this morning’s scripture lesson. Jesus is teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. There he encounters a woman with a spirit that has crippled her for eighteen years. She is bent over and cannot stand upright. Jesus is moved at the sight of her. It doesn’t say that she approached him for healing. He initiates the encounter. Seeing her he calls her over—perhaps he is in the middle of teaching, like Jimmy Carter teaching Sunday School in Plains, Georgia—when he notices her and calls her over and says, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” He lays his hands on her and immediately she stands up straight and begins

praising God. So much for Sunday school... what lesson could be more powerful than that?

So it's simple and direct: Jesus sees her, Jesus heals her. To Jesus is it absolutely intolerable that this child of God should suffer for one more second.

But as often happens, the simple act precipitates a complicated analysis. The leader of the synagogue is indignant. It doesn't say that he's sorry the woman was healed. But he is focused on trying to get the people to observe the Sabbath by abstaining from work; and the rabbi from Nazareth, however good his intentions might be, has undermined all the synagogue leader's efforts. The Sabbath is a gift from God: an offering of time set apart from other time so that God's people may contemplate God's presence in their lives; it's a time to encounter the holy, and not to be distracted by activities of the everyday. This healing is a good deed, but it is also an interruption of the holy work of the synagogue. The leader of the synagogue scolds the people: "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day." Come on people! Work with me on this!

Jesus is indignant. "You hypocrites!" he says. (I think he's addressing religious leaders in general here, and not the ordinary folks of the synagogue.) "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?" Sure they do. They bother to show kindness to their animals on the Sabbath. How much more important to have mercy on this woman, a "daughter of Abraham"? Sabbath, schmabath: something holy happened right under your noses and you're all worried about your rules! Are you so busy tending to your religion that you have closed yourselves off from the presence of God?

When we think about it, this episode is part of a much greater conversation in Luke, a conversation about the soul of the nation's faith. Time after time Jesus welcomes strangers and outcasts, and is criticized for it. Jesus sees God in a repentant tax collector rather than in a self-righteous Pharisee; in a woman of the streets who washes his feet rather than the stiff and proper host of the dinner party where this happens. And the heroes of Jesus' stories are women of great faith, foreigners, even Samaritans who show mercy rather than priests and Levites who withhold acts of kindness to preserve their own purity. Jesus lifts up a crazy father who welcomes home his prodigal son and completely passes on the opportunity to offer tough love.

When it comes to God the time and place for compassion is now. Love is not dispensed conditionally or ceremonially. The time for healing is right now. This story is a powerful reminder that the heart of our faith is mercy and not ritual.

But wait a minute. There are two places we dare not go in interpreting this story. First of all, this is not a case of Christianity superseding Judaism. I don't know about you, but when I was younger I used to hear people saying of stories like this, "See, this illustrates the difference between the Old Testament with its emphasis on rules and rituals and the New Testament with its emphasis on love." Don't go there! Please notice that this is a discussion taking place within Judaism, a discussion regarding the proper way to observe the Sabbath. What is the right balance of structure and spontaneity, of ritual and mercy? Jesus and the leader of the synagogue are contending over how best to be a Jew—the same kind of conversation that has taken place throughout the history of that great faith.

Similar conversations happen in other settings. The early Christian community to which Luke is writing was comprised of Christians from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. The early church had to decide the place and importance of religious law. This is also a conversation that takes place within churches today in a thousand and one ways: how do we balance the need for structure with the mandate for mercy? For example, why not just sell all our buildings and give the money to the poor? The debate takes place within all the major religions of the world, all of which place compassion at the center of their teachings. This is not about superseding Judaism, but the shape Judaism should take.

The point is that when we become so preoccupied with religious structures that there is no longer any room for compassion at the center of who we are, we're missing the boat. We find ourselves conscientiously maintaining a sanctuary that is empty, polishing the clubhouse. Where there is no room for compassion God, like Elvis, has long since left the building.

The second place we can't go in interpreting this story is to conclude that Jesus is being anti-religious. That argument might go something like, "We just need to be spiritual and be nice to other people, but we certainly don't need anything like institutions to do that. In showing mercy here, Jesus is trying to free us from the constraints of organized religion, which is always so hypocritical, anyway."

I don't think so. Let me observe the obvious: this incident takes place in a synagogue on the Sabbath. The synagogue is where Jesus goes on the Sabbath because he is an observant Jew. As he says elsewhere, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."<sup>1</sup> He's not trying to do away with all the religious practices of his people. He's trying to be certain that mercy remains at their heart. Yes it's true

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:17

that Jesus sees God in many places, including the beauties of nature. Consider the lilies, by all means; but you don't have to stay home from church to do it.

This passage is a call for us to put first things first. If we want to know where God is in the world, we should start with cultivating compassion, because God is in solidarity with those who are oppressed and those who are suffering. To turn a deaf ear to the cries of the world is to turn a deaf ear to God.

What is the heart and essence of the law? How can we sum up the faith? Jesus said it directly: love God with all your heart and soul, strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself. Love God and other people... it really is that simple.

Church is a good thing. Communities of faith can be wonderful places. But we certainly have a lot of apps around here. We have music apps and nursery school apps and knitting apps and Bible study apps and centering prayer apps and spiritual growth apps and fix the roof apps and fight the weeds in the woods apps. God is still speaking. But sometimes we're so busy doing our religious stuff, so busy playing with our apps, so wrapped up in the complexities of religion that we forget how to take the call when it comes.

Turns out, it's a big green button, right on the front. Very simple: God is love.

Amen

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