

## Only God Can Heal

Mark 1:14-20

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

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Christ the King Lutheran Church

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It probably goes without saying that the worshipping communities my family was part of during our time in Senegal were very different than our congregation here at Christ the King. I wrote a little about this in my on-line devotional for this week, but let me tell you a little more about it now. For the first four years, we worshipped in a house church, which is exactly what it sounds like. Our weekly worship service took place in the living room of Philipe and Veronique's home, and included their extended family, two or three other families and a handful of individuals as well. We sat in a circle of sofas and chairs, with kids and younger people seated on mats on the inside of the circle. There was a very informal, intimate atmosphere, one that allowed for some dialog around both the sermon and prayers, one where we tended to linger after the worship itself was over.

For the latter five years, we worshipped in the Dakar parish of the Lutheran Church of Senegal. This was a more traditional parish church set-up, in that it had a choir, leaders in white robes, an altar and lectern and benches in neat rows. Still it was different from here. There was only one service on Sunday mornings, a 10 o'clock service, which only meant that we never started before 10 am. Pastor Dib used to joke that the service started when enough people were there, and ended when we had done everything we had come there to do—usually a hour and a half, sometime longer. Since most people either walked or took public transportation, worshippers trickled in for pretty much the whole service. There were almost no parking places, but that wasn't a problem since so few people drove. People lingered after the service, too, not for coffee or donuts, but simply to talk.

As I mentioned in my devotional, both of these communities had the practice of seeking prayer requests just ahead of the prayers of the people. People would simply stand where they were and share their concerns, after which the worship leader would call on someone to pray for these requests—notice, it wasn't the pastor nor the lay assistant who would pray for these concerns, but someone else from the congregation. This was almost never pre-arranged, so each of us had to listen carefully, and some even noted the concerns in case they might be the one called on to lift up these requests in prayer. Some weeks, there were only a couple of prayer requests lifted up. Sometimes, the portion of the service for prayer requests and the prayers themselves lasted even longer than the sermon. Then again, that's what we were there for, and there was no one else out there waiting for our parking space, waiting to come in and worship after us, no brunch reservations we had to make on time. As Pastor Dib said, the service ended when we had done everything we came there to do.

As a sort of aside, a few people have asked me recently, why our Prayers of the People have started listing only first names, and not last names of the people we're praying for. My first response is simply to say "I'm glad you noticed!" since there have been other more or less subtle changes all the time that people haven't necessarily commented on. No, seriously, our thinking here was simply to make the prayers more intimate—and to emphasize that in our prayers, our collective

prayers, our prayers of the people, we are speaking to God, who knows the details already. By doing this, too, I wanted to be sure that we made the distinction of praying to God rather than lifting up prayer concerns to one another, I wanted to emphasize that were not using our prayer time as a sort of announcement time. So prayer requests are printed on the bulletin, in the Herald newsletter, shared by email with the prayer chain team, with more details about the people for whom we are praying. But the prayers themselves simply lift up that person to God. Maybe it's too subtle a distinction. Maybe it's not as helpful as I had imagined it to be. Honestly, I'm anxious to hear what you think about it, and only ask that you tell me or another pastor or even the worship and music committee directly, rather than simply murmuring about it elsewhere. Unlike those worshipping communities in Senegal, we don't take the time in our worship to both share our prayer concerns and then actually pray for them—we do this in other places, like small groups and bible studies and staff meetings. But here in worship, we focus on the prayer itself.

Back in Senegal, a good number of the prayer requests were for people who were sick—with anything ranging from a slight cold, to recurring malaria, to chronic or even terminal conditions. The person called on to pray would offer prayers for the people who were ill, but also for those who cared for them. And more often than not, the person praying would end that particular petition with words to this effect: “While it is the nurses, doctors and others who can give care and sometime provide a cure, we know that it is only you, God, who brings about healing.”

Sometimes God's healing and medicine's cure look very much the same. Other times, God provides healing in ways that are very different than a medical cure. It can be difficult, confusing, even painful to consider this reality, especially if the person crying out for both a cure and healing is someone we love and cherish. At other times, though, it can truly be a comfort—to know and believe that despite the advancement of a disease, despite a lack of cure or any hope of recovery in a medical sense, God is still able to bring about healing. That God can and does heal even those situations which are seemingly beyond a cure.

Author Sara Miles had this epiphany, this “a-ha” moment, as she became involved in the ministry of prayer in her congregation. As she was confronted with the prayer concerns in that community she discovered that prayer does *not* cure tuberculosis or Down Syndrome. Prayer does not cure mental illness of any kind. Prayer does not even cure the common cold. And so, she writes, “when these things *do* happen, we all rage and weep: what good is prayer? Why did I get lung cancer, as a non-smoking vegetarian who practices positive thinking? Why did my mother have a stroke, when she worked hard her whole life and never hurt anyone? Why did our baby die? Or, as people ask Jesus [in another gospel story], why was this man born blind? Is it his own fault or his parent's fault? Who is being punished here?”

And Jesus, she continues, Jesus shrugs off our desire to somehow establish supernatural cause and effect—both in assigning blame for illness and human suffering in the first place, but also in establishing formulas by which some for

whom we pray will be cured and some will not, based on the frequency or the fervency or the specificity of our prayer. And so she says again: “Prayer can’t cure. All prayer can do is heal, because [healing comes from God,] healing comes embedded in relationship, and prayer is one of the deepest forms of relationship—with God and with other people. And through these relationships there can be healing, [even] in the absence of cure.” This, she concludes, is the work that Jesus gives his followers. He doesn’t turn ordinary humans like us into miracle workers who say magic words and restore the sick to perfect health. Nor does the specificity of prayers offered by a pastor on a Sunday morning make those prayers more efficacious or successful. Instead, Jesus gives us the power to know the truth, to be set free by that truth, and from that place to enter into new relationships of healing.

The Jesus we see in the gospel for this Sunday is a Jesus who brings healing. He heals individuals, he heals neighborhoods and towns. He heals relatives of close friends—Simon’s mother-in-law in this instance—he heals complete strangers brought to him. His healing restores people to community. His healing compels people into service. His healing is part of a sort of “package deal,” as he travels throughout the region preaching, teaching, casting out demons and healing.

Jesus calls us, calls his disciples, giving us power and authority to heal—not to cure, necessarily, not to fix, but to heal—and sending us out specifically to do so. He doesn’t show us how to make a blind man see, or how to reverse the effects of metastasized cancer, or how to prevent sudden massive heart attacks, or even drive out all kinds of demons. Instead, Jesus shows us how we, too, can enter into a way of life, a manner of being, a community of love and hope and faith in which broken and sick and grieving people are held by one another in their brokenness, in their illness, in their grief. Jesus shows us how, even in the absence of cure, we can hold these in love the many broken, sick, and grieving pieces of our one body. Jesus doesn’t stop suffering, but he promises to be with us in our suffering, and calls us to do the same .

As we pray week after week for those whom we know to be sick or suffering or in grief—whether the names or their situations are familiar to us or not, whether they are new to our list or still on it after weeks or even months—may we also hear and be comforted by this underlying truth: it is only God who brings about healing.

\*Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak: Feeding, Healing, Raising the Dead*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.