

Faith Healing Faith
(Mark 5:21-43)

The accident happened when he was a small child. It had left him crippled. Walking was possible only with crutches. Running and playing and the physical activities most kids enjoy in the days of their youth were out of the question.

After the accident, the boy's doctors had believed the nerve damage might repair itself over time and that he might walk again some day. But now he was seventeen. It had been more than ten years since the accident and still he couldn't walk.

In his early teens, the boy had developed a relationship with the pastor in his small Kansas town. The pastor prayed for the boy and even held healing services on his behalf. Nothing seemed to make a difference in the strength and stability of his legs. The pastor finally concluded that healing could not take place because the boy's faith was not strong enough. His faith was just not strong enough. Until Jonas came to town. Please pray with me.

Gracious God, Christ the Healer, we all need your healing presence in our lives. Speak to us through your scripture this morning and your word proclaimed. Help us to understand the interaction between faith and healing, between healing and your larger plan for the salvation of the world. Through Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Imagine for a moment that you have a serious medical problem. You ask to be put on the prayer list. Your family prays for you. Your friends pray for you. The congregation prays for you. I pray for you. But you don't get better. Our prayers just aren't working. And you, of course, become frustrated.

Imagine now that I visit you in the hospital and tell you that your name has been removed from our prayer list. Your name is being removed from the prayer list because our prayers aren't working. And imagine for a moment that I tell you it's your fault our prayers aren't working. It's your fault because your faith just isn't strong enough. How would you feel?

The gospel reading this morning provokes the question, "What is the role of faith in healing? Does God only heal people with strong faith?" There is some precedent in the biblical text for linking faith and healing. In the story of the hemorrhaging woman she is cured by the simple act of touching the robe of Jesus.

Sensing his power has been tapped, Jesus seeks out the perpetrator. When the woman confesses, Jesus says to her, "... Daughter, you took a risk of faith, and now you're healed and whole. Live well, live blessed! Be healed of your plague." It would seem pretty clear that there is a link between faith and healing.

The story I told you earlier, about the teenage boy whose faith wasn't strong enough, is from the movie *Leap of Faith*. Jonas Nightingale is a phony faith healer (played by Steve Martin)

who uses all the tricks in the book to con the people attending his shows.

Jonas and his partners in crime operate a traveling con game stopping at big towns and cities. When one of the trucks breaks down in a small Kansas farm town, Jonas is quick to accept the challenge of making a quick buck in this town at the expense of a community that is in the throws of a crop-threatening drought.

The young crippled teenage boy becomes fascinated by the stories that begin circulating around town – stories about people being healed of all kinds of ailments. What the boy doesn't understand is that those people being healed are really actors in Jonas' cast of fraudulent characters. But the prospect of being healed by Jonas Nightingale is persuasive to the boy.

If you have been to many healing services you will find that some are phony like Jonas Nightingale's traveling scam. But others, can be very emotional and powerful, where spiritual healing occurs if not physical healing.

Both kinds of healing services are faith-based. Faith is somehow linked to healing. Faith healers like Jonas Nightingale promote the idea that the sick person has to have faith in order to get well. This conveniently provides an explanation when healing doesn't take place. It's the explanation the pastor in that small Kansas town gave to the boy in *Leap of Faith*.

If we take a closer look at the healing that takes place in the gospel reading this morning we will see that a different understanding emerges. Consider the daughter of Jairus, the leader of the synagogue. She is unconscious – if not already dead – when Jairus comes to Jesus seeking her healing. It seems that in her

condition, personal faith could not possibly be linked to her healing. Although the text isn't quite clear, it seems she didn't even know a healing miracle was taking place.

The neighbors of Jairus told him to leave Jesus alone, that his daughter was already dead and nothing else could be done. Jesus overheard what they were talking about and said to the leader, "Don't listen to them; just trust me." Just trust me! It seems Jesus was placing the burden of faith clearly on the one who is requesting the healing, not on the one to be healed. In this case, Jairus becomes the faith healer.

We can make the same case for the hemorrhaging woman. She was the one requesting the healing. It just happens that she was also the one in need of healing. Like Jairus, the leader of the synagogue, the hemorrhaging woman in our gospel lesson also becomes the faith healer.

When we pray for God to intervene into our lives or the lives of family and friends we become the faith healers. This is the reason we have a prayer list. This is the reason we ask others to pray for us. The faith of many seems to be better than the faith of one. Does that mean our faith is multiplied as the prayer chain expands? I can't answer that question. But I do know that when faith happens in community – like prayer – powerful things can happen.

So what happens if we multiply our faith by dutifully praying for our common concerns and those we pray for don't get better? Does that mean we lack sufficient faith to send our petitions to God?

As Christians we believe that prayer is one of several ways we can be in communication with God. As Christians we believe that God is not

limited by time and space, that God is not constrained by the laws of nature or people. Consequently, we believe God hears all our prayers.

Even though we collectively muster our faith and pray, even though God hears all our prayers, still healing does not always take place. And we become frustrated or discouraged. Some people immediately question their faith. Others blame God and distance themselves from the church and God's love.

Rather than question our faith or separate ourselves from God, we need to consider our relationship to God and God's relationship to us. We were never promised a rose garden, sisters and brothers. It's true that Jesus tells us "ask and you shall receive." He also said, "If your son asks for a fish, would you give him snake?" What if we were to ask for snake, presuming that a snake is what we need? Are we to understand that God will grant our request even if it might not be good for us? I hope not!

Sometimes we get so caught up in prayer as a part of our spiritual formation that we lose sight of what we are doing. Sometimes we begin to see God as a cosmic vending machine, dispensing good things that make us happy and whole. The truth is, we pray for our will to be done, forgetting that it is God's will that contains the formula for the salvation of the world.

God's promise to us is that salvation. In working toward that objective in the universe, God heals

according to a greater plan – a plan that we cannot begin to understand. The link between faith and healing is complicated when we realize that there is a greater plan – one that is much larger than our small earthly lives.

Consider these questions with that larger plan in the background. What if healing at a later date would do more good? What if saving a life would place that life in even greater peril later on? What if a prolonged illness might lead to fruitful introspection and a new spiritual awareness? What if that prolonged illness might lead to the discovery of a new miracle drug or treatment that would benefit others?

When healing takes place in response to prayer we can readily accept that it was God's will. When healing does not take place in response to prayer the explanation is not a simple one. We need to remain faithful and open to God's larger plan that is being revealed over time through salvation history. We need to remember that the absence of healing – on our terms – may well be in our best interests in the long run. We also need to not take it personally.

In our times of disappointment at the absence of healing we need to remember that faith is linked to an even greater idea than our earthly well-being. We need to remember that we are all saved by God's grace through faith in that grace – grace that is freely given, without strings attached – God's unconditional love. That grace is faith healing faith.