

The story is told of a young Presbyterian pastor who was visiting an elderly woman in the hospital. She was quite ill, gasping for breath, nearing the end of life. Surrounded by tubes and bags and machines, the young pastor read Scripture and offered spiritual comfort. He asked, "Would you like to have prayer before I go?" The lady whispered, "Yes." The pastor inquired, "What would you like me to pray for today?" "Pray that I would be healed," she responded.

The pastor gulped. He thought, "This poor woman can't accept the inevitable. She isn't facing reality." Fortunately, he kept these thoughts to himself and began to pray for her healing- sort of.

"Lord, we pray for your presence to be with our ailing sister, and if it be your will, we pray she will be restored to health and service. But if it's not your will, we certainly hope she will adjust to her circumstances."

Immediately after the pastor put the "Amen" on his timid prayer, the woman opened her eyes and sat up. She threw her feet over the side of the bed and stood. "I think I'm healed!" she exclaimed.

Before the pastor could react, she walked over to the door, pulled it open and strode down the hall. The last thing the pastor heard before she disappeared around the corner were the words, "Look at me! Look at me! I'm healed!"

The pastor pushed his mouth closed, got up and slowly walked down the stairs and into the parking lot. He opened his car door and stopped, looked up to the heavens, and said, "Lord, please don't ever do that to me again!"

We Presbyterians have an awkward relationship with healing, don't we? We pray for healing, but we don't expect anything much to happen. Certainly not anything dramatic! We say we believe God can heal, but struggle to really believe it. I know I feel that way at times. Our Scripture lesson this morning contains a story about healing. I thought it was a very appropriate one for this morning when we'll be seeking prayers for healing and wholeness later in the service. It's found in Mark 2.

*1 When Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home.*

*2 So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them.*

*3 Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them.*

*4 And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.*

*5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."*

6 Now some of the *scribes* were *sitting* there, questioning in their *hearts*,

7 "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is *blasphemy*! Who can forgive *sins* but *God* alone?"

8 At once *Jesus* perceived in his *spirit* that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your *hearts*?"

9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your *sins* are forgiven,' or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk'?"

10 But so that you may know that the Son of *Man* has authority on *earth* to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—

11 "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home."

12 And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified *God*, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" (Mark 2:1-12)

This story has long been a favorite with children because of its vivid imagery. Just imagine that mat being lowered down through the ceiling in the middle of the crowded room! But the story has important things to say to adults as well as to children.

The events take place early in Jesus' ministry. He is in Capernaum, a well-to-do town on the shores of the Galilean lake. Capernaum was also on a major trade route. Jesus used this town as his home base during much of his ministry. Word gets out that Jesus has returned after a

preaching mission and people crowd in the house to hear him teach.

Clearly, he was immensely popular at this time. That's probably why there were scribes and Pharisees there- likely sent from Jerusalem to scout out what this young, popular, itinerant preacher was up to.

A paralyzed man is brought, but the friends carrying him can't get through the crowd to get him to Jesus. Now the roofs on Palestinian homes were flat and were used as living space, being cooler than the home in the evening. Using an outside staircase common on Palestinian homes, the friends carry the paralyzed man to the roof. They dig through the earth-and-brush roof, creating a hole large enough to lower the man down in front of Jesus. (By the way, for you attorneys and building contractors, the damage they did to the roof could have been easily repaired!)

Let's make a couple observations about the story. First, Jesus is impressed with the faith of the man and his friends. "*When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'*" (Mark 2:5)

Faith is often an important component of healing stories in the Bible. The faith of the person being healed is often pointed out by Jesus himself or the gospel writers.

But that raises an important question. How much faith is necessary to receive God's blessing? Some contemporary preachers have said that if we only have enough faith, God must heal us. Therefore, if you pray for

healing, but don't receive it, it's your own fault! Your faith must be deficient. I find nothing in the Bible to support such teaching.

The relation of faith to healing is something of a mystery. For example, sometimes when Jesus healed there is no mention of the faith of the recipient. In other cases, the faith of the recipient is shaky. Remember the man in Mark 9 who said, "Lord I believe. Help my unbelief!" He received the healing he was seeking in spite of his wavering faith. St. Paul asked God for healing several times, but his affliction continued. Healing is a gift from God, sometimes given and sometimes not. Faith seems to be important in relation to healing, but the amount and quality of faith seem to vary. In answer to the question about how much faith is necessary for healing, I would say that we need enough faith to ask. Jesus talked about the power of faith the size of a mustard seed. That's not much!

My second observation has to do with the fact that Jesus is concerned about both spiritual and physical healing. His response to the paralyzed man seems pretty odd at first. "*Son, your sins are forgiven,*" he says. First of all, you have to wonder what kind of sins a paralyzed man could be committing! But, Jesus is clear elsewhere that the heart and mind are where sin is centered, so a paralyzed man could certainly have a critical spirit, have lustful thoughts, engage in gossip, be unkind, etc. Apparently Jesus saw something in this man that convinced him the man's deepest need was the forgiveness of his sins, so he gave him what he

needed most. If you have ever been weighed down with guilt over something you have done, you understand how freeing it would be to be delivered from that heavy load. Perhaps you are still carrying such a heavy burden this morning. You are welcome to seek prayer about that later in the service. Jesus would love to free you from it.

Jesus' decision to forgive the man's sins demonstrates that he is concerned with bringing healing and wholeness to the whole person. That is part of what the Kingdom of God is all about- wholeness in all aspects of life. Sometimes religious conservatives have been accused of ignoring the physical needs of people and just wanting to save their souls. Sometimes religious liberals have been accused of focusing only on the physical needs of people while ignoring their spiritual needs. Mission agencies and church mission committees have become divided over whether evangelism and church planting should be central, or addressing issues like hunger and homelessness should be. Jesus will have none of those divisions. He heals both body and soul. And followers of Jesus should also pay attention to both!

Of course, when Jesus declares that the man's sins were forgiven, he provokes a strong response from the Scribes and Pharisees! In one sense, they are right, you know. The authority to forgive a person's sins is God's prerogative alone. As the Psalmist reminds us, we sin primarily against God, who created us for better things. Therefore, only God can ultimately

forgive us. The religious leaders label Jesus' words as blasphemy, because they rightly discern that he is claiming to be equal with God. They never even considered any of this contemporary nonsense about Jesus just being a good teacher. They correctly understood that either he was who he claimed to be- God in the flesh- or he was a blasphemous heretic. A good teacher would never make such false claims.

Anyway, Jesus responds to their charge in a unique way. He basically acknowledges that anyone can say, "Your sins are forgiven." There's no way to prove that claim one way or the other. But while no one can see the healing of a soul, everyone can certainly see the healing of a body. So Jesus heals the man's body to demonstrate his power to heal the soul. The man immediately gets up and walks away carrying his mat. And everyone, including presumably the scribes and Pharisees, is amazed! Jesus has the authority to heal both body and soul, and he does!

Finally, Jesus wants to heal our bodies and souls. He is a man of compassion. Nowhere in the gospels can I find a story of Jesus turning away anyone who came to him seeking healing or forgiveness. Jesus desires to heal us. Now, Jesus certainly didn't heal every sick person in Palestine during his ministry, and his healings, like all healings, were provisional. In other words, all of the people Jesus healed, even those he raised from the dead, eventually died. All healing is provisional or temporary in nature. But Jesus desired to heal those who sought him out.

The Scriptures are also clear that God desires spiritual healing for all who seek it. Nowhere do we find anyone who is turned away from God who genuinely seeks forgiveness of their sins!

So how about you? Are you in need of some kind of healing today- physical, emotional, spiritual, relational? We invite you to come now and we'll pray with you for you. You may also come on behalf of someone else if you like. Just come to one of the prayer teams, tell us your name, and tell us for what you are seeking prayer this morning.