

## Healing in Mark's Gospel

*Luke Bushman, Mark 3:1-6 and 5:21-43. September 29<sup>th</sup> 2024*

In our first two sermons discussing the Gospel of Mark, we did a bit of an introduction, and then we talked about discipleship. While I would love to continue going through Mark's gospel chapter by chapter, I think in doing so I might have to cut some topics, or talk about the same idea more than once, because different teachings and stories repeat the same ideas. Mark like a lot of authors uses repetition to make points throughout the gospel. So, I will try to take two different texts at a time, so we can learn about a topic that Mark values. Today, we have two stories about healing, so we will be talking about the purpose in Jesus' healing, and also talk about how these healing narratives have impacted our world today. **SLIDE**

We have to discuss this in our context, because the aftereffects of these healing accounts, are often negative. Which doesn't make sense, because healing is about restoring, and yet healing narratives have done the opposite to many people. Misguided and inconsiderate understandings of the text have allowed the roots of ableism to grow within our churches and within other parts of society. People who have experienced a disability, a disease, or a tragic loss are often alienated by the way churches interpret these healing narratives.

In the Mark 3 passage where Jesus straightens a man's withered hand, Jesus' healing stirs up his opposition yet again. There are many healings that happen in Mark's gospel and Jesus is regularly opposed by others for the healings performed. This early passage in Mark contributes to the rising tensions of the story, and the negativity displayed here carries throughout the gospel. Additionally, I think there are subtle descriptions in this text, that parallel the existing problems for people with disabilities today. So, this Mark 3 text will help us set up the tension and the problem, and the Mark 5 text will guide our discussion.

To me, the opening verses show how people with disabilities are often dehumanized. There is a man with a withered hand in the synagogue, and yet the Pharisees do not see a human being. They see an opportunity to trap Jesus, and a theological talking point. They want to see what Jesus will do so they can accuse him, and their reason for doing so, is related to their understanding of the Sabbath. The man with the withered hand is

simply a tool for entrapment and topic of discussion. This is not unlike in John 9:12 when the disciples come across a blind man. **“ As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” John 9:1-2**

Directly in front of this man, the disciples start an obnoxious conversation about why this man was blind, treating him as a topic of theological discussion, not as a human being. This dehumanization of folks with disabilities is not absent from our world today. So, the first thing I see in the Pharisees is dehumanizing this man.

Jesus asks a great question, should the Sabbath be about goodness or harm, saving life or ending life. The answer is obvious, and yet we see in the Pharisees reaction that for them it is not obvious. They are upset and want to destroy Jesus. They do not rejoice that the man is healed, they would prefer the man stay in the corner. That is the second thing I see, is the Pharisees pushing this man to the margins, both before and after his healing.

While it is easy to point fingers at the Pharisees, as I have said before, sometimes we need to pause and wonder how we might be like the Pharisees. We are often like the Pharisees in the way we discuss healing. Indeed, even if we focus too much on healing, we find ourselves in the same spot of hurting others. Whether ignoring those with disabilities or insisting on healing, religion has played a role in harmful ideas. The idea that one is not healed because they do not have enough faith is very damaging, and yet it is something folks with disabilities are told often. The idea that everyone is supposed to be healed denies the fact that people with disabilities are perfect image bearers just as they are. The idea that in resurrection, everyone will have fully able bodies and minds, enforces the attitude that those with disabilities are less than those who are “able bodied”. These assumptions and attitudes can be very hurtful, and contribute to a larger world full of ableism. Ableism is a word used to describe how our world is built in a way that favours people who do not have a disability. We need to rethink the healing passages, faith, and resurrection if we want to avoid participating in ableism. Beyond just

harmful ideologies, the larger church does not have a great track record in regards to folks with disabilities.

One of the most blatant examples of ableism in the church can be seen in the response to the Americans with Disabilities Act. The act was championed in the 1980s by a group called ADAPT, and was ultimately passed in 1990 (Dingle). This act sought to rectify the fact that disabled people did not have the same rights under U.S law as abled people, as before the ADA buildings didn't have to have ramps, parking lots didn't have to have handicapped spots, and public transportation didn't have to have wheelchair lifts (Dingle). The ADA was a good thing that sought to give rights and protections to more people. The main opponent of the ADA was Christian churches. **SLIDE**

“Today, disabled people still don't have the same rights as abled people in U.S. churches or Christian schools. Those institutions are exempt from the ADA. It didn't happen by accident or loophole, though. They actively fought against being legally accountable to provide access to disabled people, as shown in archived documents. Unfortunately, they didn't hold themselves morally or biblically accountable to do so either.” (Dingle)

Churches opposed being subject to ADA regulations for two reasons: costs, and the belief that it was a form of government infringement on religion (Dingle). It was on these principles they won their case, and thus to this day, churches and any services ran by the church (schools, daycares etc.), are exempt from complying with the ADA. I am not saying any of this to scapegoat America, Canada has only recently begun putting similar legislation in place, and as far as I could tell in my reading, churches will not be required to follow these regulations. We are far behind in regards to accessibility legislation. **SLIDE**

I bring up the example of the ADA because I think it is indicative of how churches often respond to people with disabilities. Christians often want to be the faith community that instigates miraculous healings, or acts of generosity to those on the margins. Christians seem less inclined to make the world more accessible to all. Historically, our faith tradition has made decisions that are exclusive rather than inclusive, choosing to make others reliant on generosity, rather than removing barriers.

I know someone whose child uses a power chair. And he once said something to me along the lines of people should not be in a situation where they thank church members for carrying them down the stairs. There should be accessibility. In a previous sermon we talked about how the Pharisees made a system where people had to come to them to access spirituality, so they could maintain a level of influence and power. When we are slow to create an accessible world, I wonder if it is so we can make others more reliant on us, and thus feel more powerful and influential.

So it is with this troubled history, and problematic theology in mind that we look at Mark 5:21-43. In Mark 5, Jesus heals two people, and it is hard to not see the contrast between those who are healed. On the one hand, there is Jairus' daughter. Jairus was a synagogue leader, and would have had honor, respect, and stability in the community. On the other hand, there is the impoverished woman who anonymously touches Jesus to receive healing. Ched Myers notes this contrast, and believes that it is to show Jesus' breaking the strict barriers that existed in the honour shame culture he lived in (Myers, 201). Jairus as a man of social status, and leader of his house, approaches Jesus with a proper request for him to heal his daughter. However, it is the impoverished woman, with the perpetual flow of blood who is healed first, despite her lack of proper request (Myers, 201). In fact, her reaching out to touch Jesus would have been seen as highly inappropriate.

This is not just because she was in a lower social class than Jesus. She was ostracized from the community. When looking at Old Testament law, we find that anyone who is menstruating is deemed unclean for the duration of their menstruation. This woman has presumably been perpetually menstruating for 12 years. She is untouchable and excluded from worship because of her condition. If she did have a husband, she does not anymore. Any money she can make has been spent on doctors. She has no community for support, because she is too unclean to be around others. She has no place of worship, because she cannot enter the temple. She has no protection, physically or financially, because she cannot have a husband. She is left vulnerable to the world around her. The doctors she gives money to could have exploited her with ease. Her survival is dependent on others. And so she throws a hail Mary pass, and touches Jesus' cloak as he goes by. Jesus heals her. Without a proper

request Jesus heals her, without regard for honour shame culture, or for cleanliness rituals. He says “ “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” She isn’t just given relief from her physical struggles; Jesus also declares her belonging as a daughter.

While Jesus does go on to heal Jairus’ daughter, his detour to heal this woman means that she passes away before he arrives. Jesus clearly cares about people on both ends of the social hierarchy, and yet, seems to prioritize those who have no one else.

The Mark 3 passage served well as an introduction to the problems we might come up against when discussing healings. Ableism, harmful theology, and the dehumanization of people with disease, illness, or disabilities are all things we are forced to grapple with as we try to understand healings. For me, this Mark 5 passage gave me a launching point to understand this difficult topic. So I have the following three points of application or understanding for this text. **SLIDE**

#### Points to Look At in Mark 5

- Disability, Poverty, and Medical Care

First, I noticed that while we do not live in an honour/shame culture, many of the same obstacles that the bleeding woman faced are what many people face today. She was impoverished, from both her medical bills, and not being able to obtain a husband in a patriarchal culture. Her illness today would like put her in the category of “long term disability”. While our world is hopefully less patriarchal and medical care more affordable, disability and poverty are still intimately connected. The organization “Disability Without Poverty” found in a study that people with a disability are still TWICE as likely to live in poverty than those without a disability.

The problematic parallel can further be seen in how Jairus and the woman approach Jesus. Jairus is able to come to Jesus look him in the face, and explain what is happening. The marginalized woman must resort to anonymously touch his cloak. When it comes to accessing medical care, there is still a massive disparity in how people of different groups are able to get the care we need. While for the most privileged in society, the Jairus’s of the world, accessing medical care is simple. You go to the doctor that you have access to, explain the situation, and you are heard and given

the required care. Many people's experiences with accessing medical care are more similar to the bleeding woman's. Fear, shame, and even a distrust in the process are prevalent for many people. There are many reports you can find about different people groups receiving different levels of care depending on their vulnerability. A gender bias where women are not taken seriously exists. People suffering from addiction are often dismissed due to potential complexities in receiving care. Race also affects the quality of care that people receive. The Canadian Medical Association writes "Indigenous Peoples face a dire lack of health services, particularly in remote communities. They also experience anti-Indigenous racism in health systems, a lack of cultural safety and acceptance of Indigenous health and healing models."

While the passage we read today occurred long ago, the problems still exist. Jesus serves as an example to us, that equality in healing or medical care is part of our call as Christians. How can we rally behind organizations and legislation that creates equal access to medical care today.

Our first takeaway from this passage is that the obstacles the woman faced are still present today, and we are called to help

- How Do We Understand "Faith Healings"

The second thing that I found myself struggling with more than anything in this passage was Jesus saying "Your faith has healed you". I have to be honest, I don't know how to interpret this phrase in a positive way. There are so many faithful, devoted people who never experience healing in the traditional understanding of the word. It is completely damaging to link factors of marginalization with a lack of faith, and ease of life with a strong faith. This idea is very hurtful as previously mentioned. I don't know how to understand this idea of faith and healing, but I know how I don't want to understand it. My final takeaway is perhaps an alternative way of understanding Jesus' healings and that is:

- Healing as inclusion in the community

In my youth I often wondered what was wrong with me, that I never saw a miracle. I read my Bible like crazy, I prayed a lot, and I was often in spaces where those healings were supposed to happen. I have come to

understand through conversations with others, and some learning that my deepest want should not be for everyone to have the same bodies. That tells people that they are less than if they have a sickness or disability. The deepest want should be inclusion, accessibility and respect. How can we understand healing in a more positive, uplifting way?

Stephanie Tait is an author, speaker, disability advocate, and trauma survivor. I have listened to some of her discussions, and she has a lot to offer. She makes a great point that helped me understand Jesus' healing others in what I would say is a better way. For the people that Jesus healed, two things were typically true. First, because of their disability or illness, they were assumed to be sinful. That is a hard place to be in, but not unlike the equating of lack of healing to a lack of faith. Second, because of their disability or illness, they were typically isolated from the community. People suffering from many things were not deemed fit to enter the temple, as they were seen as "deformed" or "unclean". Stephanie Tait points out that Jesus was operating within this world and this system. Perhaps the most important part of Jesus healing others was that he brought them back into community. Jesus operated in the world he was in, with the resources he had. He wanted to break down barriers and create inclusion.

Jesus isn't just working on the "quick fix" of healing people, Jesus is also working at changing attitudes around inviting the so-called outsider in, and making the worship of God more inclusive. But for the time being, if Jesus wants to see people reintegrated into community, they must be healed.

What does this mean for us today? Well as the hands and feet of Christ, if healing is about bringing people back into community, then that is something we are able to do, without the help of miracles. We are able to make our spaces more accessible. We are able to advocate for others. We are able to look at one another as image bearers of God, and humans of value. We are able to fight against the assumption that every person with a disability wishes/wants/needs to be healed. In his miraculous healings, Jesus was able to give people access to worship spaces, community supports and financial stability. We have the opportunity to do the same without needing a miraculous healing. We can make our churches more accessible and welcoming. We can remove the stigma around illnesses and disabilities, so all people feel welcome into community. We can

advocate for legislation that protects people with disabilities from high rates of poverty.

There can be a lot of challenging questions when we come across Jesus healing someone. There are a lot of discussions to be had regarding the intersection of ableism and Christianity. I believe that Jesus calls us to navigate these conversations with care, and with a goal of inclusion. This means listening to others about how Christianity can help, and also how it can harm. Instead of trying to transform people so they fit in the world as it is, maybe we can transform the world, so people fit in as they are. Let us put people first.

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