

John Docherty, June 5, 2016

“You have healed me”

The theme for today's service, taken from the Lectionary, is “You have healed me”. The readings from 1 Kings 17, Psalm 30 and Luke 17 are focused primarily on death, or near-death in the case of the psalm, and God's intervention.

In the three and a half years that I've been acting as pastor here at MFM, I've discovered that the need for healing, and our concern for those affected by health issues, whether due to sickness or injury, is never very far away.

Our mortality, as expressed in our failing bodies or in the loss of someone dear to us, is only too painfully present.

Not a Sunday goes by that we're not praying for someone in this circle, or someone close to someone in this circle. In this circle alone over the last three years we've prayed for MFMs fighting various kinds of cancer; we've prayed for those hampered by broken bones; we've prayed for those struggling with heart issues; we've prayed for those who have lost close family members or very dear friends.

Sometimes we pray by name; sometimes we pray more generally – for those caring for someone, for the doctors and nurses responsible for their medical care, for extended family members, for friends and neighbours.

But in all of our prayers, we ask God to step in somehow and help move the healing along.

In the passages we read today, God steps in in some fairly dramatic ways.

These aren't passages of people being healed of minor aches and pains, or even important physical hardships like blindness, or lameness, or leprosy.

No, these are stories of people being healed of death. It doesn't get much more dramatic than that.

From a Biblical study point of view, the story of Elijah's bringing back to life of the son of the widow with whom he's staying, and Jesus' bringing back to life of the son of the widow of Nain are interesting parallels.

The most obvious link, of course, is the fact of the widowhood of these women, and their vulnerability with the death of their male children. It's not quite so explicit in the

story of Elijah, but we are told that the son of the widow of Nain is her only son, and she is then now left without a male protector. This point is important enough that Luke underlines the double whammy inflicted on this woman. He says : "... behold, a man who had died was being carried out, *the only son of his mother, and she was a widow ...*"

Luke doesn't expand further on this point, but his readers would have immediately recognized the precarious social state this would have created for the woman.

The other obvious parallel is that these are both stories of men of God stepping in to restore life to a dead body. We don't have many stories like this, and it's not a little surprising that Luke is the only one of the evangelists who tells of this particular miracle.

In the entire Biblical canon, I can only think of a handful of instances where resurrections occur.

In the New Testament, we only have Lazarus, Jairus' daughter, those who rose at Jesus' death (at least according to Mathew), and, of course, Jesus' own resurrection. In Acts, chapter nine, Peter revives Tabitha. In Acts chapter 20, a young fellow by the name of Eutychus falls asleep and falls out of a window as Paul drones on inside. He's "taken up dead", but Paul leans over him and pronounces him to be alive. In Acts chapter 14, Paul himself is left for dead after being stoned, and at least one commentator I consulted thinks this could also be a case of resurrection from the dead, although the text doesn't quite stipulate that he actually died.

In the Old Testament, I think there are only three instances where we read of someone coming back to life, and all of them are related to the prophets Elijah and Elisha. The first is the passage we read from 1 Kings. The second is found in 2 Kings 4 where Elisha repeats Elijah's miracle, this time for a Shunammite woman. The final occurrence in the Old Testament is in 2 Kings 13, where a dead man is thrown into Elisha's grave, and comes back to life when he touches Elisha's bones.

Frankly, I'm quite happy that we have only a very small number of stories like this, even in a Book that is full of stories of divine intervention; divine miracles.

I'm happy, in part, because I'm troubled by stories of people coming back from the dead – this sort of thing is just too far outside my experience of life.

I'm not troubled by the fact that the stories are there. I'm certainly capable of rationalizing the stories and coming up with some kind of explanation of what happened that suggests the people in question weren't really dead; that the people of the day didn't have the sophisticated technology available to us to detect very subtle signs of life.

I'm partly troubled by the fact that the stories are in our sacred scriptures, so it's a little more difficult to dismiss them as being purely the product of uninformed science.

Certainly the Old Testament stories of resurrection seem to be somewhat gratuitous exhibitions of the miraculous, as is Matthew's reference at Jesus' crucifixion to the fact that "... the tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many."

But I'm also partly troubled by these stories because they seem to me to be stories that reflect our very complicated relationship to our own mortality.

We don't like to see someone we love suffer.

We grieve when someone close to us is seriously ill, and we grieve even more when that person's life ends, especially if it ends at too young an age.

We all want, and hope, to live full, healthy, happy lives.

So when sickness or injury disrupts that hope, we quite understandably reach out for comfort.

We reach out to each other, and we reach out to God.

I have to admit that I always feel a little awkward during the congregational prayer when I, on behalf of MFMs, put voice to our desire that healing come.

It's not that I'm uncomfortable expressing that desire, it's that I try to be very careful exactly how that desire is framed. In asking for God to intervene, are we asking for the laws of nature to be overwritten? Are we asking God to reverse the natural processes of life?

I've occasionally made reference to this little book : *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, by Rabbi Harold Kushner. As much as I like C.S. Lewis as an Anglican apologist for Christianity, I really like Kushner as a clergyman concerned with pastoral care for people struggling with tragedy.

Some of what he says in this book is taken from the Talmud, a compilation of discussion of Jewish Law. Among other things, it says this :

"The Talmud ... gives examples of bad prayers, improper prayers, which one should not

utter. If a woman is pregnant, neither she nor her husband should pray, 'May God grant that this child be a boy' (nor, for that matter, may they pray that it be a girl). The sex of the child is determined at conception, and God cannot be invoked to change it. Again, if a man sees a fire engine racing toward his neighborhood, he should not pray, 'Please God, don't let the fire be in my house.' Not only is it mean spirited to pray that someone else's house burn instead of yours, but it is futile. A certain house is already on fire; the most sincere or articulate of prayers will not affect the question of which house it is.

“... We cannot ask God to go back and rewrite the past.

“... Neither ... can we ask God to change the laws of nature for our benefit, to make fatal conditions less fatal or to change the inexorable course of an illness. Sometimes miracles do happen. Malignancies mysteriously disappear; incurable patients recover and baffled doctors credit it to an act of God. All we can do in a case like that is echo the doctor's bewildered gratitude ...”

Kushner then says that another prayer that is inappropriate is prayer that seeks harm toward another. He tells the story of a pair of shop owners who are bitter rivals. An angel comes to one and says “God has sent me to tell you that He will give you anything you ask for. But know this, that your competitor across the street will get the same thing you ask for, but twice as much. You can be very wealthy, but he will be twice as rich. You can live a long and healthy life, but he will live longer with better health.”

The shopkeeper frowns, thinks for a moment and says, “All right, strike me blind in one eye.”

“... Finally,” Kushner says, “we cannot ask God in prayer to do something which is within our power, so as to spare us the chore of doing it. A contemporary theologian [a rabbi by the name of Jack Reimer] has written these words:

“We cannot merely pray to you, O God, to end war;
For we know that You have made the world in a way
That we must find our own path to peace
Within ourselves and with our neighbors.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end starvation;
For You have already given us the resources
With which to feed the entire world,
If we would only use them wisely.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to root out prejudice;
For You have already given us eyes
With which to see the good in all people,
If we would only use them rightly.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end despair,
For You have already given us the power
To clear away slums and to give hope,
If we would only use our power justly.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end disease;
For You have already given us great minds
With which to search out cures and healing,
If we would only use them constructively.

Therefore we pray to You instead, O God,
For strength, determination and will power,
To do instead of just pray,
To become instead of merely to wish.”

Kushner then goes on with these words :

“If we cannot pray for the impossible, or the unnatural, if we cannot pray out of a sense of revenge or irresponsibility, asking God to do our works for us, what is left for us to pray for? What can prayer do for us, to help us when we hurt?”

Kushner's answer to his own question is that prayer of the best kind puts us in touch with other people, people who share the same concerns, values, dreams, and pain that we do. He argues that prayer, and religion itself, for that matter, serves to bring us into community, where God can be found.

He draws from Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist and grandson of an Orthodox rabbi. Durkheim argues that religious rituals “taught people how to share with their neighbours the experiences of birth and bereavement, of children marrying and parents dying. There were rituals for planting and for harvesting, for the winter solstice and for the vernal equinox. In that way, the community would be able to share the most joyous and the most frightening moments of life. No one would have to face them alone.”

And it's in that act of building community that we find an act of God that can provide

comfort and strength to face the various ordeals that come our way. “Where two or more are gathered, there am I among you.”

Something I've heard over and over again over the last three and a half years is how much MFMs appreciate the gestures of support and prayer that are offered when difficulties come. By and large, few of those gestures have any direct effect on the process of healing that is taking place. Most of us have no particular role to play in trying to ensure that physical healing happens – we just want people we care about to know that we *do* care, and that we want to help in any way we can.

It's a very human act, but also a very Godly act.

I've actually attended a funeral at which some of the members of the congregation called on the person in the casket to rise up and return to them. It was a very disturbing experience for me, but also a very understandable outpouring of grief.

On one level these stories of resurrections trouble me because Jesus is surrounded by any number of people who would be thrilled to have him show up and raise their loved ones from the dead. How is this or that healing or resurrection justified?

But in the story of the raising of the son of the widow of Nain, I think we have a very spontaneous human act of compassion on Jesus' part.

Yes, others might wonder, “what's she done to deserve this? What about me?” And I think that's a fair enough question.

But at the same time, I like to see in this incident a picture of a Jesus who isn't preoccupied by the hordes of people who are suffering every bit as much as this widow.

I'm tempted to say that he's not at the moment focused on fixing the problems of the world. He's focused on the woman in front of him. But I'm also tempted to say that in focusing on fixing the problems of the woman in front of him, he is, in fact, focused on fixing the problems of the world.

We're not told that anything is asked of him, but he's clearly touched, and he, in turn, reaches out to her. It's a very human response to a very human expression of pain.

I hope that we at MFM are doing a good job of reaching out to each other. I hear that those on the receiving end are appreciative. I know that those on the reaching out end do so out of concern for the well-being of others in this circle.

And I know that our prayers for healing are offered as a cry of the heart, as much as a

plea for intervention.

When we were in college, Mary-Lou and I were involved in a musical group that travelled around to different churches and did worship services. We both sang, and I played flute. We also developed an Easter cantata and I had a piece written by the wife of one of the other members that I'd like to use to end this meditation.

It's a re-telling of the story of the raising of the sone of the widow of Nain, from a first-person perspective. It's not a narrative of what happened, so much as a personal memoir of the significance of this very human, this very divine, event.

“I remember the day he had a stone in his sandal.

He was talking and laughing with Thomas and the others, and he didn't notice it for a bit, until he began to limp.

I remember I thought it odd,
that the son of God
should be limping along a dusty road in almost worn-out shoes, with a stone in them.

But I remember, too, that very day,
that we stopped for a bit along the way
and watched a funeral pass by.

And how the women cried,
especially the dead youth's mother.
First a widow, and now another death.

And Jesus stepped forward,
still limping a bit,
and he touched her hand,
and he dried her eyes,
and he said to the body
“Young man, rise!”

And the boy sat up!
Why, I nearly died,
And now new tears shone as his mother cried.

And we all spoke in whispers,
and we watched in awe,
the man with the limp.

The son of God.