

What does it mean for Jesus to be our healer? What is the healing power of Jesus?

In this Gospel story today, as in many others, there is the physical element of healing, from illness or disease of all kinds. Because Jesus was physically here, as a human, He could work those miracles of healing in people's bodies, minds, and spirits.

There is an enduring physical element of Jesus' healing that many of us know or have experienced in our lives. The terminal diagnosis that was only supposed to give us a short time, but we beat the odds and lived even longer than anyone anticipated. The injury that if something was even a few millimeters over from where it hit your body, it could have been the difference between life and death. The every day healing of deep breathing in the midst of chaos and turmoil that calms and centers us beyond what our words or thoughts could have dreamt up for us. The physical healing of Jesus is still very present with us.

And on another level, there is also a spiritual healing that Jesus provides. A relational, personal healing that happens within and among God's beloved people. Both the physical and the spiritual healing are provided to the woman who came to Jesus in today's story.

The references in this story, of dogs and table scraps in the midst of healing, may seem kind of odd at first, but it's important to understand the larger cultural context the Canaanite woman and Jesus are in. Throughout the Old Testament, God's chosen people, Israel, were often at odds with people from the region of Canaan. There was tension between these two groups that lasted for hundreds of years leading up to this point. This tension and this history is why this story is profound on an extra level beyond simply the physical healing.

We can see this tension between Jesus' disciples, who are Israelites, as they seem aggressive and annoyed that this woman keeps appealing to Jesus to heal her daughter. We know the disciples aren't always exactly welcoming to folks outside of their known community, history, or heritage - we hear stories of this hostility or just wanting to ignore people and move on across the Gospels. Some notable examples include the woman at the well, the Good Samaritan, and even the feeding of the five (or twenty) thousand - initially they wanted to send folks away for the evening meal. But Jesus is the one who provides welcome for even the most unlikely people. Jesus, while perhaps initially hesitant in some of these situations too, overcomes these human constructs of difference to reach out and minister to the people on the fringes, on the outside, the hurting, the outcast, the downtrodden. Now Jesus is human, as well as divine, so he makes a rather unflattering comment to this woman, speaking in metaphor, with her as a dog. But that woman knew that Jesus, Son of David, chosen one of God, was greater than even these tensions that made everyone around them nervous. Jesus, by the power of God, is able to minister to and heal truly all people, even the lowly and unlikely. Jesus himself was brought into the world by a woman who seemed lowly and unlikely. But the faith of Mary in God's working in the world created a whole new reality for all of creation. The faith of women is certainly powerful, and by the grace of God, all people are healed by Jesus Christ.

So let's think about this Canaanite woman, and the faith and courage she needed to seek out Jesus to heal her daughter. She does not take the subtle approach, not a "excuse me, sir, could you possibly, maybe heal my daughter?" No. Even from the get-go she needed that healing for her daughter, and went after that need as only a mother's love and woman's ferocity could propel forth. She shouted at Jesus, "Lord, have mercy on me!". She acknowledged his great power, his history, that he is of the Israel line of King David, even though that history provided tension in the situation. The healing of her daughter was more important than any of that, and Jesus had the power to heal. And though Jesus initially ignored her,

she did not travel all this way to see Jesus, the Son of God, just to ask him for healing once. She faced the demeaning comments of the men around Jesus who just wanted her to be quiet and go away, and nevertheless, she persisted. She came back with humility and wit, and Jesus saw that her faith and her love for her daughter were both real and powerful. This mother advocated for her daughter who was suffering horribly under the influence of this demon and knew that she needed the holy healing power that only Jesus could provide.

Some scholars believe that people who were under the influence of demons, using that kind of language for people in need of healing, meant that folks were suffering from what we now call mental illnesses. They believe these behaviors are akin to what we now know as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, various forms of psychosis. It's important not to project modern constructs onto what is written and shared from this ancient time in the scriptures, but there is a commonality to the human condition, the human experience, that we share across time and space. Mental illness has been around for a very long time and is part of the human condition for so very many people. Mental illness also impacts our bodies in significant ways, when our minds are not as healthy as they could be, in ways unique to each person. And even when we or our loved ones feel tormented, overwhelmed, ill or defeated, there is hope and healing to be found for these enormous challenges through faith in our God of life and love. Seeking trained professionals in our modern time is also hugely beneficial. But truly, no human experience at its core is left out of what we find in the scriptures. God is with us in all things. And what a gift that we can rely on that reality of what it is to be human, in all its pain and joy, and everywhere in between.

So why the comments about the dogs and the crumbs from the table? Folks with non-Jewish cultural backgrounds were more likely to have their house pets more intimately connected with their families, feeding their kids and their dogs at the same time. In Jewish homes, this likely was not the

case. Jesus highlights the cultural difference here, that giving the dogs food at the same time as the kids may take food away from the children. But the Canaanite woman observes that even the dogs need food to survive as well, regardless of when or what they are fed. Above all else, there is commonality to all people and pets needing to be fed, and Jesus sees that this woman's faith is greater than any cultural difference that may arise. He saw her faith was genuine, her love for her daughter was real, and in that space of needing healing, he answered her calling. Jesus answers us when we call on Him for healing, any kind of healing, no matter what time or place or background we may have.

Truly Jesus Christ is the only one who could provide and bring out the commonality between these different cultural groups, and even today, Jesus provides us with healing connection to our neighbors. Jesus calls us to love our neighbors, and he demonstrates that even when it's uncomfortable, even when there is hundreds of years worth of cultural tension and abuse, that there is commonality in being human. There is more in common than what is in difference. Regardless of our background, our history, or heritage, we are all in need of healing. That healing takes place in our bodies, in our minds, and in our spirits. Christ Jesus provides the ability for all people, all bodies, all minds, all spirits, to be healed, to be made new, and to be rooted in love for our Creator God, through whom all things are possible. Thanks be to God, Amen.