

LESSONS IN HEALING

Acts 3.1-10

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Acts 3.1-10 (the *Inclusive Bible*)

One day, when Peter and John were going up to the Temple for prayer at about three in the afternoon, a person who from birth was unable to walk was being carried in. Every day the person was brought to the Temple gate called “the Beautiful,” to beg from people as they came in. Seeing Peter and John on their way in, the person being carried begged them for alms. Peter fixed his gaze on the individual, as did John. “Look at us!” Peter said. The person looked at them intently hoping to get something. Then Peter said, “I have neither silver nor gold, but what I have I give you! In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!” Peter pulled the person up by the right hand and immediately the beggar’s ankles and feet became strong. The person jumped up, stood for a moment, then began walking around the Temple – walking and jumping about and giving praise to God. When the people saw this, they recognized the one who used to sit and beg at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple. They were struck with astonishment – utterly stupefied at what had happened.

LESSONS IN HEALING

“Healer of our Every Ill.”

The story TK read for us from Acts 3 is another description of what a resurrection uprising looks like.

By now you have heard me say at least twice that the difference between the way we understand resurrection in the West – as *one* person rising – and the way it is understood by Christians in the East – as *anastasis*, not the rising of *one* person but the uprising of *all* people – that difference aims us directly at the work of human liberation.

The book of Acts tells us stories to help us identify what that uprising looks like.

Last week it was the story of people selling everything they had to make sure the needs of everyone were met. It is an uprising that defines the way we belong to one another and the world as *relationship* rather than *ownership*. After all, how much do any of us really own? And, in the end, even if we don't own anything, we have a relationship with everything. And that shift in the way of thinking about our belonging to one another and the world can be freeing.

Today we get a glimpse of what that uprising looks like as defined by healing.

Peter and John go into the Temple and they see a person who cannot walk, begging at the gate called "Beautiful." Peter says to that person: "Silver and gold I do not have but what I *do* have, I give to you; in the name of Jesus, rise up and walk." And immediately that person got up and started dancing through the Temple.

Sometimes healing can be that dramatic.

But most of what I know about healing, I learned from HIV/AIDS.

I learned this song, "Healer of our Every Ill," when I was working with AIDS Pastoral Care Network in Chicago. I've told this story many times before. We put together a service in which we invited people to come forward and to write the names of those they had lost to AIDS on these long white banners as we sang, "healer of our every ill."

And they did come. By the hundreds. Older people and young people. Individuals and clumps of people holding each other up. Parents and partners. Siblings and friends. Religious people and atheists. It didn't matter. They kept coming. And we kept singing.

And what that means is that engraved on my consciousness is this irony of singing “healer of our every ill” as people kept coming forward to write the names of those who died of this terrible disease.

One of the things HIV/AIDS taught me was something you probably already know; that healing is not the same thing as a cure. Healing is about “peace beyond our fear and hope beyond our sorrow.” For us in the AIDS Pastoral Care Network, healing was about making sure those who had been isolated and rejected didn’t die alone. Healing was about living life to its fullest every day.

I read Susan Sontag’s book and John Fortunato’s book about re-contextualizing healing in the light of AIDS. I went to conferences. I spoke at conferences.

And then I got tired.

As I said to a friend the other day, I discovered that healing is complicated. All of that healing work was right and good helpful. But, honestly, I wanted a cure. I prayed for a cure then just like I pray for a cure now for Cancer and Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s disease.

The person in the story this morning didn’t just receive some kind of metaphorical healing. According to the story, that person felt strength in places he hadn’t felt it before and when Peter started raising him up, he jumped up and started dancing!

And so, while we were singing “healer of our every ill” we were also advocating for healthcare and applying whatever political pressure we had to fund research. We had friends who worked in “Act Up,” making sure that the deaths of people with AIDS was not ignored.

What I learned about healing in those years was that healing and cure may not be the same thing. But whatever healing we can do in the absence of a cure is no excuse for doing the work and paying the price that a cure demands.

When it comes to HIV/AIDS, thank God for the advances in treatment that have been made. I thank God every day for them. My life would be very different without them.

And I also realize that health organizations still report 7000 deaths every year in the U.S. from complications related to AIDS. The number of deaths around the world is still staggering – especially in Africa. If you want to pinpoint one of the places where race and privilege are a matter of life and death, you don't have to look any further than the toll AIDS is still taking on communities of color.

I always find it a little shocking when people tell me the church should stay out of the politics of healthcare.

Is there anything more obvious about what Jesus did and what the followers of Jesus continued to do than healing? *Both* healing as a way of life and, as this person in Acts 3 would happily tell you, a cure.

So we keep singing “healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow, give us peace beyond our fear and HOPE beyond our sorrow.”

What the HIV/AIDS crisis had to teach me about healing was that there is a lot of healing that can be done in the absence of a cure. But that healing should never be an excuse for the hope that there is something beyond sorrow.

The crisis also taught me that healing is complicated because sometimes people think they – or other people – need to be cured of something that isn't really a disease.

One of the things we struggled with in that work in Chicago was the link people made between HIV/AIDS and sexual orientation. We heard all the time from people who thought the problem would take care of itself if gay people would just stop being gay – if people could be cured of their “sick” sexual orientation, their bodies would be healed too.

And, unfortunately, some of the people who were living with the disease believed that too. So we had to add guilt and shame to the list of things that needed healing. And that was some of the hardest work of all.

Gender identity and sexual orientation do not need to be cured even when there is healing that needs to be done – the healing of isolation and rejection and guilt and shame and self-hate.

But gender identity and sexual orientation aren't the only things. Sometimes I think the language we use about disabilities ends up defining people in unhealthy ways.

Difference isn't something that needs to be healed. Difference isn't a disease that demands a cure.

And that leads me to one of the other things I learned about healing from HIV/AIDS. It isn't just individuals that need healing. Our society needs healing. Our culture needs healing. Our world needs healing.

If you read the rest of the story in Acts 3, the healing of this individual at the Beautiful Gate, was the occasion for Peter to talk about a communal sense of responsibility for killing an innocent man; about injustice and forgiveness; about hope and “universal restoration” (vs. 21). Healing isn't just about our own bodies. It's about how we belong to one another.

I've been reading a book recommended to me by a colleague, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace, and Healing*.

It is written by a white professor at Duke, Chris Rice, and a visiting professor from Uganda, Emmanuel Katongole (Kai-toh-engohleh). As it turns out, Professor Katongole (Kai-toh-engohleh)'s brother died of AIDS in Africa in 1993.

These authors tell the stories of people who have learned that the work of healing is both individual and social.

In 1970, they write, John Perkins, an African American pastor and community organizer was nearly beaten to death by white state police officers in rural Mississippi ... The Christianity that Perkins and the police officers shared did nothing to challenge the wall that racism had built between them.

In 1990, they write, a white South African Anglican priest named Michael Lapsley, chaplain for the African National Congress ... opened a letter from forces inside the apartheid government. The bomb inside blew off his hands and an eye, shattering his eardrums. For years Lapsley had patiently worked for justice in his country, only to be betrayed by white South Africans who considered him a traitor ... [having] tried to cross a dividing line and had come face to face with the power of division.

Last week Israeli soldiers targeted and shot Palestinian protestors in Gaza. Two nights ago our government sent missiles slamming into Syria.

Professors Rice and Katongole (Kai-toh-engohleh) say:

Though not all of us have experienced the large-scale trauma of war or the violence of brutal racism, we all know brokenness and division at some level, whether through divorce, abuse, social injustice, conflict in our community or right inside our own family. We live together in a broken world, and we do not have to live long to learn that what we need is healing.

Healing, as Perkins and Lapsley and the young women coming to us next week from Israel and Palestine will tell us, takes genuine honesty about what divides us – what is broken in our belonging to one another and the world - and courageous imagination about what healing could be.

John Perkins recovered from his injuries and planted “the Voice of Calvary congregation and community development organization ... [that] maintained a vibrant interracial life across economic boundaries” for four decades.

Michael Lapsley “struggled to find the real hope God offers to people who would rather kill their neighbors than have to deal with them.” He founded the Institute for the Healing of Memories in South Africa and built a retreat center for “thousands of everyday South Africans of all colors and backgrounds ... [to heal] the wounds of violence and separation.”

Next Sunday we will be led in Adult learning and in worship by young Israeli and Palestinian women who use their individual creativity to build relationships that contribute to a communal sense of healing and peace.

None of this happens without painful honesty about just how broken we are and just how broken the world is and courageous imagination about how the world could be.

And so we keep singing,
*Healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow,
Give us peace beyond our fear and hope beyond our sorrow.*

And there is another song we sing. It also comes to us from the trauma of HIV/AIDS.

It was written by our own Rod Romney as he got to know a young gay man who found himself alienated from and rejected by his family. If healing was to come for him, it would have to be away from home. There was no going home again.

When he was diagnosed with AIDS, his family refused to visit.

And then he died. Without them.

The family did come for the funeral. And they finally got to see their son – the life he lived, the love he shared, the community that had gathered around him.

If reconciliation came for the family, it came too late. Rod wrote:
*From our closed-in fears, from our wasted years, to the place of our belonging ...
From our selfish views, learnings we refuse ... bring your scattered people home.*

But that's not the end of the story. Because here we are. Still singing:
*To our highest call, sharing love with all, bring your scattered people home.
To the truth we are, to our rising star, bring your scattered people home.*

Most of what I know about healing I learned from HIV/AIDS.
And the most important thing I learned is that:
Today is not too late for reconciliation.
Today is not too late for healing.
Today is not too late to find your way home again.

So today, if you hear that voice –
if you hear that voice calling you home on love's renewing tide,
that voice calling you home to that redeeming, that healing, side,
if you hear that voice calling you home from all the places your life has
been scattered – *today*, if you hear that voice,
do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

“Healer of our Every Ill,” is by Marty Haugen. There was a lot of literature produced during the early years of the AIDS pandemic that tried to re-contextualize healing in light of the disease. Susan Sontag’s *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988) and John Fortunato’s *AIDS the Spiritual Dilemma* (Harper & Row Publishers, 1987). The current AIDS statistics are from Mark S. King at www.poz.com/truth-about-the-7000. Emmanuel Katongole & Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* (IVP Books, 2008). Dr. Rod Romney’s “Bring Us Home” is used by permission.