

Healing Shadows

sermon digest

June 26, 2011

Mark 6: 54-56; Acts 5:14-20

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A segue is a literary device to carry a story smoothly from one scene to another. Compared to the primary scenes, the segue is relatively unimportant, a means to an end. The reader is expected to focus on the events before and after rather than on the transition. The segue remains a connecting link where it contributes to the central story without calling attention to itself.

Luke fills the gap between the mysterious deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in the infant church and the second arrest of the Apostles with a segue, a general statement about numerous “signs and wonders” done by the Apostles and the strangely familiar comment that people carried the sick into the streets of Jerusalem on cots and mats so that Peter’s shadow might fall on them as he passed by. Mark’s Gospel makes a similar segue from the story of Jesus walking on the water to the encounter with the scribes and Pharisees. People brought the sick on mats into the marketplaces so that they might touch the fringe of his cloak and be healed. We remember the story of the storm, Jesus walking on the water, and the exchange with the Pharisees but hardly notice the segue about the sick crowding the marketplaces to be healed. This is probably as Mark intended it.

The fifteenth century Italian painter Masaccio did the unexpected thing; he focused on the segue about Peter’s healing shadow as if it were intended to be an event worth remembering. In the painting, Peter seems aloof, almost oblivious to the suffering humanity lining the wall along the street. Without recognition from Peter, the light coming from his left casts a compassionate shadow on the pathetic faces of the sick and disabled along the way. Given the artist’s time in history, Masaccio may have been painting the aloof figure of Pope Peter, who in the medieval Church always stood above the masses; but he also seems to have been looking to the light beyond Peter. Masaccio seems to be saying that Peter was not the source of healing; healing power flowed from the light. The artist was true to the message of Acts. Certainly Luke did not center the power of healing in the Apostle. Peter was an instrument of God in the ministry of healing much as a scalpel is an instrument in the hands of a surgeon. The healing shadow of Peter was produced, not by Peter, but by the light of God.

The segue also raises an essential question for the role of the church in health and healing that goes beyond the primitive biblical world in which it is set. Like the ministry of Jesus, the miracles of the early church seem to move in all directions from dynamic displays of divine power to numerous healing events, escapes from prison, and even the resuscitation of the dead. But the mission to people seems to major on health and healing.

Healing is about more than bodies. Early in our survey of the miracles of Jesus in the Gospels we noted that miracle workers were common in the New Testament world and that the miracles neither proved the role of God in the ministry of Jesus nor distinguished him from other would-be messiahs of his time. Acts is obviously an intentional continuance of the Gospels. The ministry of Jesus reaches beyond the cross and resurrection to continue in the life of the church. As in the ministry of Jesus, health and healing are integral to the gospel of salvation. In the Gospel stories of the healing ministry of Jesus, the word salvation appears eighteen times. The central word for salvation is concerned with the well-being of the whole person. Healing is never just about a disease or a disability of the body, and salvation is concerned with more than the soul. The New Testament word for salvation is about being made whole or healthy.

When Jesus healed, he always addressed the direction and purpose of the person after the event. The healing event changed the whole life of the person, not just the affected part of the physical body. Healing was a means to a greater end. Jesus did not heal everyone, and everyone Jesus healed eventually succumbed to the death that comes to all mortals.

Having finished teaching one summer day, the rabbi Hillel announced to his students, “now I am going to perform a religious duty. . .that of taking a bath.” When his disciples seemed puzzled, the rabbi inquired: “Ought I not to take care of my body? Was it not created in the likeness of God?”

And, we are reminded of the question of Paul (1Cor. 3:16): “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”

Dr. Sam Rankin was a missionary physician in China immediately following World War II. The need for specialized surgery for his child brought his family back to the States when the revolution of Mao

tse Tung overran the mission clinic taking the lives of Dr. Jim Wallace and the other personnel with whom Sam had worked. Sam returned to work with the Chinese in Hong Kong and later had a key role in building the Baptist hospital there.

Sam was a healer, not a preacher. He was retired, living in Oak Ridge when in the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board narrowed the role of all missionaries to evangelism. Sam was appalled. He had always viewed his work of healing to be integral to the ministry of the church to the whole person. His problem with the new policy was theological as well as practical. His gifts and training were in medicine, but he also saw the work of healing as a significant aspect of the whole salvation taught in the New Testament.

So did Jesus. So did the first Christians.

In an article on “Jesus as Healer” Georgetown University Bible professor John Pilch (*Christian Reflections: Health*, p. 19ff) dares to ask what it means to heal. He dismisses the idea that healing is limited to dealing with disease. Well-being has to do with everything in our lives, family and finances as well as physical health. He notes that the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (Luke 4) restored the meaning to her life. When the fever left, she resumed her role as hostess. The Bible has no interest in our medical concerns about the cause of the illness or whether it was totally and finally cured.

Healing addresses the needs of people. Luke’s segue does more than connect two dots in his story; he raises the vision of the reader to the larger world. This is the first indication in Acts that the ministry of the church was going to leave the city limits of Jerusalem. Luke writes that people brought their sick from neighboring communities outside of Jerusalem. The text gives no hint of a social or economic class of the people in need, which probably means that they were mostly from the impoverished middle class. People of rank or wealth are usually identified in the New Testament, often to expose their lack of understanding and character. Like the ministry of Jesus, the ministry of the early church addressed the people who had no rank or status.

Luke is believed to be the author of Acts. A distinct characteristic of Luke’s Gospel is the attention he gives to the underclasses—to the poor and the sick, to Gentiles and women. We have often wondered about the limited reach of the healing ministry of Jesus or, later, of the church. Healing stories are usually about one person at a time, while untold multitudes stand outside the picture suffering. We might even accuse the Gospels of rationing health care to the few choice people who happen to come along at the right time in the right place. But the segues in Mark and in Acts are exceptions to this rule. Both end with the unprecedented comment that all were healed.

If we could draw any judgment about the state of healthcare in the world today from the experience of the New Testament, our present vision is far too small, far too narrow. It is too small in what we identify as health. It is too narrow in that we have grown accustomed to rationed care excluding multitudes of people who are economically shut out of the system.

I doubt that either Mark or Luke intended for us to take a giant leap to the conclusion in the present political debate about universal health care, but we cannot escape the implication both in the individual healing stories and in the segues that health and wholeness is the normal state, the intention of God for the creation. If I may steal a note from last week’s message about the healing of the lame man at the Gate Beautiful (3:6), “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you,” the healing ministry of Jesus and later the ministry of the church was not under the control of economic issues. Not one healing incident in the Bible involves an economic *quid pro quo* that dominates the health care issues today.

Robert Kruschwitz charges: “The current notion of health is too myopic: it addresses only the amelioration of disease and pays no heed to the promotion of well-being or wholeness. In other words, it is basically inhumane because it does not encourage the development of patients’ full potential” (*Christian Reflections: Health*, p. 13). I would add that the current notion of health is too dependent on the commercial interests of entrepreneurs. Healing is about bringing people to wholeness, in every sense of that word. Because it is about the whole person, personal health must involve the church as well as the hospital.