



How should we read or preach the Gospel healing narratives?

By David McLachlan

This is one of a series of posts/studies intended as a useful resource for the church. It is produced by the Disability Justice Hub of the Baptist Union. Several in the group have disabilities. I don't, but our idea is that the whole church should be involved in a conversation about disability, Christian faith, inclusion and church.

In the Gospels, Jesus always seems to be healing people. This post begins to explore how we might read and interpret the accounts of those healings. The sheer number and variety of them makes it clear that this was a major part of Jesus' ministry. Healing, it seems, was an acted-out parable as part of his message about the Kingdom of God. Some accounts give us lots of detail, like that of the man born blind whose story fills the whole of John chapter 9. Others give little, like the whole crowd who are healed in just a single verse in Matt 4:24. But at the same time, these accounts present us with some of the biggest challenges when we want to read the Bible from a disability point of view. Our interest might be in how we should relate them to healing prayer ministry. Or we might be considering how they should be discussed or preached in a church setting that includes people with and without what we see as disabilities or long-term health issues. Either way, they raise some thorny questions.

It is good to work with a particular example. The one chosen here is the account of the woman who had suffered from haemorrhages for twelve years in Mark 5:25-34. Shorter versions appear in Luke 8:43-48 and Matt 9:20-22. Later posts also explore other accounts of Jesus healing people, or the places in the Bible where disability occurs prominently. Those will hopefully also be useful.

Mark tells us that the woman had suffered much and that there seemed to be no cure, in fact her condition had become more disabling. We do not know its origins, but as well as pain, such bleeding would have afflicted her married life if she were married, and her social and worship life, as it would have rendered her ritually unclean in the sight of the community (see Leviticus 15:19-30). We are told that it had also impoverished her. The woman makes her way through the crowd pressing in on Jesus as he is on his way to help Jairus, whose daughter we have learned is dying. The woman touches Jesus' cloak and her bleeding stops. Jesus is aware of what has happened and, to the consternation of his disciples, insists on stopping, drawing the woman out, commending her faith and making her healing and restoration public.

Lots of things about this passage could be explored. They include Jesus' pastoral care and sensitivity to this woman in the midst of the emergency over Jairus' daughter. They include what Jesus meant by power "going out" of him, and his emphasis on faith, perhaps to counter the superstitious idea that a cloak could have a "magic" quality about it. But our aim here is not a whole Bible study. It is to focus on what the passage says about Jesus, disability and healing.¹ How we read it will be influenced by our own perspective.

1 A very good review of the wider exegetical points that come out of this text and also of the way the structure of the text operates can be found in: Lamar Williamson Jr, *Mark - Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), pp108-113.

If we come from, say, a Charismatic healing ministry perspective, we might feel the main point here is the divine physical curing of this woman's condition as a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. If we come from a disability perspective, rightly conscious of her sense of exclusion, we might be more inclined to say that the main point is her holistic reintegration, from outsider to insider, and that that is a better sign of the Kingdom.² Surely both of those are in the passage, but is one more important than the other?

We might also worry that the passage entrenches a negative view of disability in God's eyes. Perhaps only physically healed people can also be completely saved people, or can be true disciples. This suspicion might be reinforced by the fact that so often the coming Kingdom is demonstrated by the elimination of disability. Also, Jesus tells the woman that her faith has saved her. On the one hand, does that mean that if we are not healed it is because our faith has failed or is too weak? On the other hand, since the New Testament word for 'healed' also means 'saved',³ does it mean that her healing from her condition is somehow wrapped up with being saved from sin, perhaps in the sense that her condition was caused by sin (hers or someone else's)?

It soon becomes clear that we are unlikely to resolve all this if we stay within just this healing account, or indeed if we only look at this and other instances of Jesus healing people. To make progress, we need a broader guiding principle to shed some light. That can be done by drawing on the insight from the earlier post *Disability and God - a Place to Begin*. That post considered God's overall attitude to disability by looking seriously at disability's place in God's creation as part of being human. It discovered that (i) disability and sin ought to be disentangled - as we stand before God, those with disabilities are not wearing an extra badge of the Fall just because they are disabled; and (ii) the cross demonstrates that God is for us all - there God participates, gets involved, deeply in all the aspects of life that alienate us from him (sin, pain, loss, frustration) and deals with them, and all that is good is preserved and fulfilled through the resurrection.

Bringing that insight to this account allows it to be read with much more freedom and confidence. We can see that the power of God to bring about his Kingdom and save us from sin and death through the cross is the same divine power that is at work in the woman's physical healing from a condition that had caused suffering and had served to cut her off from so much in life. But we can say those things without any fear that we are pushing disability and sin together. We can declare that this woman's healing does prefigure, in a partial but vivid way to those in the crowd, the fullness of the Kingdom of God in which 'Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more'. (Rev 21:4).

At the same time, it allows us to see clearly Jesus' intent that she should be reintegrated into public life, society and worship. In doing so, Jesus deals with the ritual uncleanness attached to her condition and that is also a sign of the coming of the Kingdom, where outsiders become insiders. That uncleanness had served to alienate this woman in a raft of other ways, particularly from the life of worship through which we draw close to God. However, it again allows all this to be said without any need to conflate her disabling condition with sin and the moral failure of the Fall. So, the cross, which is the source of the healing power we see at work here, will certainly open the way for this woman, like all of us, to be forgiven for sin. But we have found that it is more than that: the cross also opens the way for the much wider and more complex aspects of her situation to be dealt with by God as well.

2 These different approaches are explored in two books in particular. These are: Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) and Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011)

3 This is the Greek word 'sōzō'.

Discussion questions:

- What is your experience of how people interpret this healing account (or similar ones)?
- Jesus said to this woman “your faith has healed you.” What is your experience of healing prayer ministries (these might be positive or negative)?
- Can you ask a disabled person what they feel about this passage? If not, what do you think they might say?
- How do you think the woman involved felt about the whole episode?
- Jesus seems to make little distinction between diseases (eg leprosy) and longer term disabilities. Does that matter?
- What do you think about starting our interpretation as suggested here - with confidence that disability is not inherently a result of sin or the Fall? Does it help?
- Can you think of other accounts of healings in the gospels where this approach would also help?