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Church of the Holy Spirit
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Luke 17:11-19

A friend from high school reached out to me when I was in seminary. Through social media, they "found out" that he was studying to be a priest and sent a message. This wasn't unusual; people often send prayer requests through Facebook/Instagram and texts, but this one ended in such a way that it has stuck with me for decades.

After explaining the rare and complicated health concern, and how they feared it may have been passed on to their child who was still in utero, they concluded their petition saying- My faith hasn't made me well, maybe yours will. Thank you.

Even all these years later, there are nights when I find myself wondering if I did the right thing, said the right thing, or was faithful to my own understanding of God's will being done on Earth as it is in Heaven in how I responded to this message. Unpacking the theology of healing, faithfulness, and thanksgiving in scripture is hard enough. But to compound that unpacking with having to wrestle with one's own faithfulness or faithlessness and the implications that may have on those you care for and about is unfair.

The last line of today's Gospel message, "Go your faith, has made you well," gives me pause, and I said so much to my friend. As I've grown older, my understanding of healing has become increasingly nuanced. Being made well is not the same as being cured, nor is being cured the only way to be made well. In my life and profession, I have witnessed many faithful people who, as they walked in the shadow of death, were not cured of illness or saved from suffering in body, mind, or spirit. Often, folks ask why one person recovers while another does not, and I have never been able to answer that question unequivocally. Except to say God knows.

But I can faithfully say suffering is not a result of sin, despite the understanding of Jesus' community and contemporaries that skin ailments in particular were thought to be a kind of punishment.

As a result, individuals who suffered from leprosy were considered unclean and were therefore separated from the community. There are many stories of practices like this in the Bible, most memorably Naaman and Miriam, who suffered from skin conditions that forced them to bathe and seek out a holy person for help. For Jesus to tell the lepers to go to the priest isn't out of order. This is how one would be reconciled to the community as well as to God once one's skin had been visibly healed.

On the surface, it makes sense; for my friend therefore that upon finding out that I was in seminary, they would ask me to pray for them. A faithful response to a spiritual as well as a physical need falls in line with what Jesus is teaching the disciples, as well as those who follow them, and those who have been made

well. Although I wasn't a priest yet, and didn't share the same understanding of it as Jesus, to them, it was the same thing. A priest is a priest is a priest, they guessed. Or at least close enough.

This is one instance where what the Episcopal Church teaches about scripture being taken seriously, not literally, put me in conflict with another Christian. Since the medical doctors hadn’t been able to cure this condition, and their own prayers seemed ineffective, turning to scripture, which they had been taught should be taken literally my friend both assumed that my prayers would be more impactful than theirs, and that since healing hadn’t come in body, mind, or spirit, then the faith within them was inadequate.

Because the TEC holds fast that scripture does include all things necessary for salvation, but also recognizes that Jesus’ disciples and our ancestors did not know all things. For instance, Moses and Miriam, Namaan and Elisha, Jesus and the disciples had no concept of germs, genetics, bacteria, or hygiene as our contemporary culture understands them.

Because of this, the Episcopal tradition of engaging with scripture involves more than reading it as an instruction manual, which is the way the Bible is approached in more charismatic and evangelical denominations. This kind of teaching can cause emotional, spiritual, or physical harm to individuals who desire healing, hope for a miracle, or long for a cure that doesn’t come.

Believing that one's faith is the precursor to miraculous healings can be detrimental to those who love and care for themselves or others.

So often, folks, when facing terminal, chronic, or life-altering illnesses, ask why God is not answering their prayers. Why does one person who gets chemotherapy cured while another's tumor grows? How does one person's surgery go off seamlessly while another leads to a plethora of complications? Most of us know someone who has suffered pain and grief and loss, despite their well-maintained faith practices. They love God but still suffer. It is tempting in those circumstances to ask why their faith isn't enough. Why didn't or doesn't God heal me or the person I love?

It's one thing to think about suffering in a philosophic or theological lens and another when you or someone you love is suffering. Why was faith enough to heal the Samaritan, but it isn't enough to recover all those people in scripture, or throughout history? Why doesn't Jesus heal everyone of every illness? If anyone could, it would be Jesus.

Jesus' healings in scripture are not given only to the usual suspects. We know that Job's health and fortunes are restored because he is faithful. Still, for Christ, there is usually something outstanding about the person or the context. In today's lesson, an unexpected element is that only one person came back to thank Jesus for the healing they received.

Despite 9 out of 10 people asking for healing, and all 10 individuals being healed, everyone else went to the priest, was declared clean/ well/ healed, and then went about their lives. The 1 who returned was the only one who wouldn't have usually gone to the Jewish priest. Instead, a Samaritan, who would have been sworn enemies of the Jewish people, the outcast, the unexpected, the outsider of the outsiders. Jesus' disciples and anyone who had seen the 10 would have known this person observed a different prayer practice, and professed a different set of laws and beliefs from themselves. Everyone would have known their faith was different just by looking at them, but Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well."

This is the unique aspect of this lesson: the Samaritan who lived his faith drastically differently from Jesus was still healed, valued, and made whole. They could then go out into the world to do the work they had been created to do. The healing is secondary to the faith that is within them; how that faith is practiced is inconsequential. However, when the lesson is taken literally rather than seriously, and the words are interpreted at face value, the practices of faith become transactional.

What my friend asked for all those years ago was rooted in a similar understanding that their practice, prayer, and belief weren't enough to heal them and protect their child. They wanted someone to intercede, and they contacted me - the seminarian- because I must have some direct line to God.

However, the longer I have lived in this life of faith and practice, the more I realize that's not really how this faith thing works. Faith, healing, and wholeness are interconnected. Still, suffering is not a direct result of the measure of one's faithlessness or faithfulness.

We hope for miracles and give thanks when they occur. However, even though it is difficult emotionally at times, through the understanding of history, reason, and skill, we see how healing is not the same as curing. Life and death are part of mortal existence. With the belief in resurrection and eternal life, it is also known that wholeness and reconciliation healing of self and relationships, in other words, are not solely attributed to our own faithfulness or faithlessness in God, but in our awareness and acceptance of God's love for us.

This is the foundation of love for God as well as our love for ourselves and others, because when we do not blame our shortcomings or find fault in the bodies in which we live and move and have our being, we recognize that we are whole. We are loved even when our bodies fail us, which they will, because these bodies are mortal, after all.

We go about our lives attempting to live according to God's will for us, and yet we hope to live our lives without suffering and without reproach.

We all want to be told that our faith has made us well, so that we can go. We ask for what we want, and when we don't get it, we assume failure. But there is no failure; it is not that our faith is insufficient, but instead that life and death are normal aspects of being human.

If we live long enough, Illness, disability, and pain will be part of each person's experiences of this mortal realm.

I wish I could tell you that prayer will always heal. That I have a hotline to Jesus, and that my friend's child has avoided the spectre of genetics.

But the truth is that just as my friend didn't know they carried the gene until adulthood, neither will their child, and for now, we pray.

Not because it demonstrates the faith that is within us, but because it reinforces the knowledge that for God, healing, wholeness, and homecoming are given not only to those who pray, dress, eat, work, do certain things in specific ways, but to all who ask for God's will to be done, for healing and wholeness it is offered.

God is wider than any one faith can begin to perceive. And so we do our best to understand the impossible, and let the spirit carry our doubt in this life and the next.

Amen.