

The Doctor Is In
(PART THREE OF A FIVE PART SERMON SERIES—JESUS: THEN AND NOW)

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver at
First Congregational Church
Lebanon, N.H.
7 October 2012

Mark 5.25-34

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?"' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

When you hear the words “the Doctor is in” what is the first image that comes to mind?

If, like me, you grew up knowing that one of the great joys in life are the Sunday funnies, you'll have thought of Lucy, seated behind her booth, ready, for a fee of just five cents, to dispense some purportedly sage advice to her patient, who was most often the hapless Charlie Brown. Now if we consider this situation for a moment, it seems quite odd. This, after all, is the same Lucy who through her repeatedly violated promise to not, this time, yank away the football just as Charlie Brown is about to kick it has shown herself to be wholly, utterly untrustworthy. Yet Charlie Brown hands over his nickel time and again, often receiving guidance that's not worth two cents, let alone five.

What's going on here?

Readers of *Peanuts* know that Charles M. Schulz was a very canny observer of the human condition, laying bear through Charlie Brown and his youthful compatriots our adult anxieties, neuroses, hypocrisies, and needs. In Charlie Brown's visits to Lucy, we see the desperation that can come with a fruitless search for healing. Sometimes, we so want things to be made right that we'll go anywhere, try anything, listen to anybody.

Consider the amazing lengths we contemporary Americans go in our quest to be well. Fad diets, lifestyle gurus, calorie tracking apps, gene therapy, organ cloning you name it, we have it, want it, or at least dream of the day when it will be available. According to the Kaiser Foundation, Americans spent some \$2.3 trillion on health care in 2010. To put

that in context, the Commerce Departments' Bureau of Economic Analysis reports that Gross Domestic Product that year was \$14.735 trillion. Put another way, in 2010, we Americans devoted 15.6% or a little less than one-sixth of our national wealth to health care.

No doubt, much of that was money well invested. Consider all of the treatments, drugs, and medical knowledge that we take for granted that did not exist in the youth of many present here today. Wondrous. Life-changing. Dare I say, miraculous? Yet, too, many of us are aware, through the news, through work, through the care of relatives or friends, of the disproportionate amount of resources devoted to caring for those in the last six months before death, in situations where "quality of life" is a concept wholly unrelated to the existing reality. Still, the expenditures continue, growing ever greater with the passage of each year.

And what of our spiritual health? What story may we tell there? I was not able to find any definitive studies or analysis of how much time Christians or indeed religious people in general spend in prayer or service to others but my very crude back of the envelope estimate of the former would be somewhere around 200, perhaps 500, million hours per year. Another benchmark, and a telling one given our society's love of money, is how much people are donating to their faith communities. The answer for 2010, according to Giving USA, was \$95.88 billion, or 32% of the \$298.42 billion given to various philanthropies that year. People are spending significant amounts of money on spiritual health - though, we should note, nothing compared to what they're investing in health care for their bodies. Still, people clearly care about the spiritual life, whether they're committed members of a church, seekers after meaning, or stalwart atheists arguing their point with the conviction of fundamentalists.

What does all of this tell us? Well, it confirms our intense desire to be healthy, in mind and in spirit. We'll spend huge amounts of money, travel great distances to find what we want, explore new paths to wholeness. Sometimes we'll find what we want with ease. And other times we'll be like the woman described in Mark's story.

Consider the information you've just heard about money spent on health care, of time devoted to religious life, and then spend a moment thinking of this unnamed woman. She captures all of our fears, all of our needs, all of our hopes regarding physical and spiritual healing.

She's in dire straits. She's "endured much under many physicians." I know many here today have done likewise. Something is wrong, but the doctors aren't quite sure what. So tests are conducted, treatments are administered, sometimes surgery is performed, but to no avail. She's "spent all she had." Again, too, I know there are those among our congregation who have done this or fear they will have to do this if they or a loved one are to receive the care they need in a nursing home.

She's tired, she's broke, and her condition is only getting worse.

But then a miracle happens. And it's not the one we suppose. It's not her instantaneous healing, as amazing as that may be.

It's her decision to reach out to Jesus, to touch the hem of his garment.

Miraculously, in her moment of despair, she did not give *up* hope. Instead, she gave *into* hope.

She didn't conclude that because of her illness it was clear that God had forsaken her. Instead, she realized if ever there was a time to reach out to God, this was it. Our translation tells us that she thought, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." But one possible reading of the Greek offers an alternative: "I will be saved."

Not only is she looking for healing. She is seeking salvation. If only she can touch this holy man, if only she can connect with the divine, she will be saved.

It's hard to stress the audacity of what she did. Not only was she ill, not only was she destitute. She was an outcast, set apart from her community because of her condition, deprived by Levitical statute of physical contact for the last twelve years. Imagine that! Twelve years without touching others. True, we don't know how devout her family and friends were. Perhaps they ignored such proscriptions. But surely the knowledge that one's own holy scripture and traditions deemed one to be unclean, one to be set to the side because of something wholly beyond one's control, must have been a crushing burden, as debilitating as most any illness.

And so finally she took a risk, rolled the dice, stepped off the proverbial cliff edge. And the risk paid off, the dice came up box cars, and she found herself standing firmly on thin air. She was, Mark tells us, "healed of her disease." Note the syntax, better yet, hear the cadence, the rhythm. She was healed of her disease. She was relieved of her burden and freed from her oppressor. She was saved.

And what of Jesus? What did he do? What happened to him here? He knew that power had gone out of him. Should we be surprised? Caring for others requires sacrifice, of time, of resources, of energy, both physical and psychic. Taking care of others can be demanding, it can be draining, it can take a toll.

It can also, we know, be fulfilling, rewarding, and life affirming. This, based on his words to the woman, is how Jesus sees care for others. This, through his journey to the cross, is how Jesus cared for others then, and cares for us today.

When we first learn of Jesus' recognition that power has gone forth from him, we could well wonder whether he'd be angry, upset. This incident takes place as he's on his way to

the house of Jairus, the synagogue president whose daughter has fallen gravely ill and whom Jesus is going to see. He might be in a rush. He might only have so much power at his disposal to heal others. He might simply dislike the presumptuous violation of his personal space. Yet when the woman comes forward, we see that Jesus is anything but angry. He doesn't care that he's been delayed, that his power has been tapped, that he's been touched by a ritually unclean person. Instead, he's tender, affectionate, calling the woman, "daughter." Then he tells her, "Your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

No boasting here. No claim by Jesus that he's the hero of the day, the one to be thanked, that a generous contribution to support his ministry would be appropriate and appreciated. No, *your* faith has made you well he says. Though it was Jesus' power that healed her disease, it was the woman's faith that made such healing possible. She had to open the door for Jesus to enter. Think about the power she has been granted! Do not misunderstand me. Mark is not saying that the woman is responsible for her cure – and thus by implication would be at fault if she had not been healed. What he is claiming is that Jesus the healer, who is also Jesus the king, the one who performs mighty deeds to show the power of God has invested us with power of our own. We are not mere objects; we are actors. In the moment when we feel most helpless, we are given agency. It the place when we feel events are beyond our control, we are shown how to take charge. When things make no sense, we are taught how to think of life in a new, empowering way. The Gospel here tells us that healing is available to everyone one of us, if only we are willing to reach out for it.

This is not to say that each and every ailment will be cured by faith. I will make no claims about the efficacy of faith healing. I can't rule it out: after all, I profess a faith in a God who came to us as a man who was crucified, buried, and then rose from the grave, conquering death in the process. But I can't in good conscience advise anyone here to skip his or her next appointment at DHMC or APD in the hope that a little extra prayer will suffice to mend that broken bone or lower one's cholesterol, let alone cause a cancer to go into remission.

What I can assure you is that healing is on offer to those with faith. It's a healing that comes from the acceptance that one is never alone, that God is always, indeed *especially*, present when one is sick and suffering. God does not afflict us with illness to teach us lessons or to punish us. But God has fashioned us as imperfect creatures in an imperfect world governed by certain dynamics and processes. Our bodies, our minds, fail, sometimes because of a genetic flaw, sometimes because of inadvertent exposure to an aggressive microbe, and, yes, sometimes because of poor choices on our own part. But when this happens, God is intimately present, standing by us, holding us close by, comforting us as would a loving mother or father, cradling us as if we are, no, *because we are*, God's beloved daughter, God's cherished son.

Our faith doesn't cause God to heal us. Rather, it invites God to enter fully into our lives, to relieve us of our isolation, to free us from our powerlessness, to envelop us with love, and hope, and grace, and, healing.