

Healed by Faith

Matthew 9:18-26

¹⁸ While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, “My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” ¹⁹ And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. ²⁰ Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, ²¹ for she said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” ²² Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And instantly the woman was made well. ²³ When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, ²⁴ he said, “Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. ²⁵ But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. ²⁶ And the report of this spread throughout that district.

Theme Statement

Matthew pairs two contrasting figures to present his singular image of faith: clear awareness of the magnitude of Jesus’ power, reverence before it, and unambiguous confidence in a love that encourages fearlessness in reaching out to him.

Exploring the Word

Matthew borrows the focus passage from one of his sources, the Gospel of Mark (5:21-43). Mark is known for a storytelling technique called an intercalation—that is, opening one story into two parts and sandwiching a second story between them. Matthew makes some significant changes to the two stories, but he preserves the intercalation. Therefore, be on the lookout for how he intends the two stories to be mutually interpretive. See an online version of gospel parallels at tinyurl.com/33mj37kw.

Matthew 9:18-19, 23-26 The official: Faith pays homage

Matthew's version of the focus passage is considerably shorter than Mark's, and the changes Matthew makes bring three points into sharp relief.

First, Matthew omits many details from characters' actions, thoughts, and dialogue, zeroing in on the conversations Jesus has with the official and the woman. Matthew deemphasizes Jesus' power to heal while emphasizing the official's expression of faith.

Second, Matthew describes the official as simply kneeling down and speaking, whereas Mark says the official fell at Jesus' feet, repeatedly imploring him (5:22-23). The verb Matthew uses here can be translated "paid him homage" (9:18), which amplifies the official's awareness of Jesus' stature while minimizing a display of begging or beseeching.

Third, by the time the official approaches Jesus, his daughter has already died, while Mark says she was "at the point of death" (5:23). Matthew's official asks for the daughter's resuscitation, not merely her healing (9:18). Matthew also omits Mark's account of Jesus' reassurance and encouragement to faith (5:36) because the official has already displayed extraordinary faith in his belief that Jesus can and will raise his daughter from the dead.

Matthew 9:20-22 The woman: Epitome of confident hope
The phrase "made well" appears three times in 9:21-22. It translates the Greek word *sōzo*, which is also translated "to save." *Sōzo* means to be healed of an illness and thus saved from suffering or even physical death. But it also can mean salvation in a spiritual sense—the restoration of wholeness or deliverance from the power of sin or God's judgment. *Sōzo*, with its broad sense of rescue from all manner of danger or destruction, allows for an ambiguity of interpretation. Here, the woman's issue of blood is a physical condition, so translators tend to render *sōzo* as "be made well," emphasizing the physical healing. But it is more likely that Matthew intends *sōzo* to mean that to which the physical healing opens—her deliverance from what would have been considered God's judgment of her in her ritual uncleanness. *Sōzo*, therefore, also refers to her full inclusion in the community, a restoration to wholeness with psychological, social, and spiritual aspects.

Notice how Jesus doesn't take responsibility for what has happened; he attributes her being made well to *her* faith. Remarkably, Jesus doesn't actually do anything to or for the woman—he offers no touch or special words. The woman merely had to reach out to him. Jesus says it is the faith of this gesture that has made her well.

Matthew pares away quite a bit of narrative detail, focusing attention on what Jesus says to the woman—another change from Mark's telling. Matthew's Jesus says, "Take heart," which can also be translated "Be confident!" or "Be of good courage." Jesus affirms her confidence in God's readiness and willingness to heal her, to save her.

The Word Today

Michael J. Fox, the actor, was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 1991. After an initial period during which he kept his diagnosis secret, drank excessively, and struggled with depression, he reoriented his life along with his time, talent, and resources. He has since written several books, and his foundation for Parkinson's research has raised over \$650 million. Fox has been known to say that he is a better man for having Parkinson's than he believes he would ever have been without it ("The Most Optimistic Guy in Hollywood," *Beliefnet.com*, accessed Nov. 30, 2020).

We might wonder, even marvel, at his ability to say such a thing, afflicted as he is by such a debilitating illness. We might ask ourselves if we'd be able to say the same thing in the same circumstance. Unless, perhaps, we can imagine Jesus saying, "Take heart, be of good courage; your faith has made you well."

Fox does not consider himself a particularly religious person. Yet there is something in his disposition that we might recognize as faith—a life-affirming response to his challenges, a capacity to find a deep meaning in great suffering, and an unleashing of generative energy. As is true of the life of faith, this disposition was hard won. Fox first had to recognize he had no control over his disease and could do nothing other than surrender to it.

This is also the fundamental wisdom of the first three steps of the twelve-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous: (1) an acknowledgment of powerlessness; (2) a belief that only a power greater than one's self can lead to restoration; and (3) making a decision to turn one's life over to a higher power. We might recognize faith here too, and the success of AA bears witness to its power to heal.

We see this same faithful disposition in the woman and the official. Both are utterly powerless—one before a long-term chronic illness, the other before his daughter's death. Each knows that only a power greater than themselves can lead to the restoration of life. Paradoxically, it is the awareness of their powerlessness that empowers them to approach Jesus.

Faith can indeed make us well, although there is interior work to do in order to grow our faith, and we might have to become a little wiser than we sometimes are about what it means to be well. Jesus says, "Take heart, be of good courage"—he is waiting for us to reach out.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. What experience have you had with miracles? If you have ever prayed for one, was that prayer answered in the way you wanted it to be?
2. Do you think there is a difference between being healed and being cured? If so, how would you explain it?

Exploring the Word

1. Compare and contrast the two main figures in these stories. Make a T-chart and write "the official" at the top of one column and "the woman" at the top of the other. Under each make a list of behaviors, words, attitudes, and so on. Circle similarities between the lists. Examine the differences. What differences seem significant to you?
2. What does the official's behavior reveal about what he believes about Jesus? What does the woman's behavior reveal about her belief?

3. Despite making many changes to Mark's original version, Matthew preserves the two stories as an intercalation and a single account. What does each of the parts illuminate about the other? How does each part help you interpret the other? If the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, what does the whole story communicate that each of the two parts could not on its own?
4. *Sōzo* means to heal in a physical sense or even to cure. It also means to rescue or deliver in psychological, social, and spiritual senses. If you were a translator, what word in the English language would you use to express both meanings simultaneously?

The Word Today

1. Think of a challenging experience you have had, about which you might say you are a better person for having it. What role, if any, did your faith play in becoming that "better" person?
2. What exactly do you mean when you talk about faith? Try to write a definition of faith that does not depend on any other "Christian" or "church" words. Or create a visual image or find a piece of contemporary music that expresses your experience of or ideas about faith. Again, do so without the help of explicitly Christian symbols or music.

Closing Prayer

O Christ the healer, we have come, to pray for health, to plead for friends. How can we fail to be restored when reached by love that never ends? Amen. (ELW 610, stanza 1)

Further Study

Mark 5:21-43

Daily Readings

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| M. Numbers 15:37-41 | F. Matthew 9:32-34 |
| T. Luke 8:40-42a, 49-56 | S. Matthew 9:35—10:1 |
| W. Luke 8:42b-48 | S. Matthew 9:18-26 |
| T. Matthew 9:27-31 | |

Memorization

Matthew 9:22

Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well."