

Cat Goodrich
 First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
 February 4, 2018

Heal
 Mark 1: 29-39

Critics will tell you that there are four ways to respond to a work of art, music, film, or fiction:

I see that it's good, and I like it: *The Brothers Karamozov*

I see that it's bad, and I don't like it: *The Emoji Movie*

I see that it's good, but I don't like it: Paul Gauguin's Fauvist paintings of Tahiti

I see that it's bad, but I still like it: so much falls into this category for me! *Cheetos*. *Hootie and the Blowfish*. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. And, for the purposes of this sermon, the escapist sci-fi novel *the Host* by Stephenie Meyer.

The Host is a mediocre work of fiction at best, I know. But I liked it. I may have read it more than once. The premise is that a parasitic alien species has invaded earth, conquering us by taking over our bodies. Humans become Hosts. After the hostile takeover, it turns out that the aliens are far more advanced scientifically and socially. They live peaceably together, and develop technology to keep human bodies in tip-top shape. They heal sickness, pain, or injury with a simple mist they call "heal." Sprayed into the air and inhaled, it works like magic to instantly repair and restore.

That's the stuff of science fiction, isn't it. Miraculous healing from a breath of air.

Contrast that with Michel Faber's *Book of Strange New Things*, where a missionary sent to evangelize an alien colony on a faraway planet finds a subset of ardent Christ believers – Jesus lovers they call themselves. He discovers their deep faith is rooted in the biblical healing stories – because their bodies cannot heal. An injury as minor as a scrape or a bruise leads to death. No wonder they are transfixed by the promise of new life and resurrection. No wonder they long for healing.

The stories about Jesus agree: he preached, he taught, he ate with people he wasn't supposed to eat with, and he healed the sick. What do you make of

these stories of Jesus exorcising demons and healing people? What do you think about the connection between healing and faith? There are studies that show the power of prayer in aiding a person's recovery – whether it's the placebo effect or randomized divine intervention is harder to say. There's a lot of bad theology out there that draws a link between the strength of one's faith and the healing made available to you. Note that I said, "bad theology." We have known too many people who deserve to be healed and aren't; too many people who should not suffer but do. As the story of the exorcism last week taught us, Christ opposes all forces which prevent human flourishing. It is not God's will for us to suffer.

So how do we make sense of these stories of Christ the healer? Because there are plenty of faithful people who do not get well. People we know and love, to whom we would give our left arm and half of our heart if it would just make the cancer go away. People for whom we would do anything, if only we could save their fading memories, their failing hearts, their frail bodies. But we cannot. We cannot. Despite prayers and the miracle of modern medicine, too often cancer grows. Memory fades. Infections flare. Viruses multiply. Each one of us, eventually, dies.

So did Lazarus, twice.

But history tells us that early Christian communities were healthier than others. It's hard to say why, exactly, but their call to care for the sick was probably part of it. People were afraid of illness at that time; they didn't understand why people would get sick, so they ostracized sick people, avoiding them, well, like the plague. This may surprise you, but sick people left alone to fend for themselves do not do so well. But with disciples to visit and feed and anoint and care, patients fared better, and often recovered. So, perhaps, Christ's power to heal was shared with his disciples in this way.

Before the invention of antibiotics and the widespread use of vaccines, a sickness like a fever could become serious very quickly. It can still be serious, as anyone who's had the flu in the past few weeks can tell you. Mark tells us that Jesus touches Simon's mother-in-law and immediately the fever leaves her, and she begins to serve them. He touches her, despite her illness, and heals her. And... she serves them?

As you might imagine, I have a difficult time with this story. Like so many other women in the biblical story, Simon's mother-in-law doesn't get

named. And once healed, she has to hop out of her sickbed and into the kitchen. Because I'm sure she felt up to it. Scholars spin this by explaining that it was an honor for first century women to serve their guests, and they're right, we have to read the text as a document bound by its culture, space and time. By healing her, Jesus restores the woman to her rightful place in the household at that time. Okay. But let's not read this as prescribing that the *only* place for a woman is to serve men. Because 2000 years later, the pervasive power of the patriarchy is still a curse that needs to be broken, still a sickness that needs to be healed. As some are saying, Time's up for that work to be done.

There are some scholars who don't see this story as patriarchal at all. They argue that Mark casts this woman, Simon's mother-in-law, as the first true disciple.

Her fever is healed, and she responds by serving Jesus.

Later in Mark, Christ says of himself that he came not to be served but to serve – and it's the same greek word, diakonia, where we get our word, deacon.

All who follow Christ are called to serve; it's a mark of discipleship. So a woman whose response to Christ's healing touch is to serve him – that means she- an undervalued, oppressed woman - understands what most of the other disciples don't: that discipleship means service. So she's not only healed, she's lifted up out of the oppressive system completely, given a place of honor as a true disciple.

This is a different kind of healing. Jesus isn't just healing an individual's sickness. With his touch, he's healing structural, social sin that is more entrenched than we can fathom. And throughout Mark's story, Jesus heals in this way, on both the micro and the macro levels: With the exorcism last week – in the text, not in worship – Jesus restores a man who had been shut out of temple worship. With the healing this week, Jesus heals a woman but also lifts her to a place of honor. And goes on to heal a man of leprosy, and give sight to the blind, and bring sanity to a man they kept chained to a rock. He touches the people he isn't supposed to touch, he includes the people proper folks excluded, he uplifts the people that have been left behind.

This micro and macro, personal and systemic healing is how Jesus enacts the kingdom of God.

It's how we enact the kingdom of God, too. Because even though most of us are well – well enough to be here, hopefully not stricken by fever – and if you are, I say to you again – *go home...* We are all suffering from some kind of affliction. Some of us suffer from the sickness of greed; we all know the violence of poverty. Most of us are trapped by the sin of racism and the oppressive burden of patriarchy and misogyny – it is so hard to escape. It is so hard to imagine what healing looks like.

I can see why some deeply faithful people stick to the showmanship of faith healing and the simplicity of prayer. It's like wanting to spray a mist or say a word that instantly heals. This work to love and serve those who may not get better is a lot harder. This work to heal the broken systems that bind us takes so much longer. So much more courage and imagination.

Rachel Held Evans, in her book *Searching for Sunday*, draws a distinction between healing and curing. “The church,” she says, “is called to the slow and difficult work of healing. We are called to enter into one another’s pain, anoint it as holy, and stick around, no matter the outcome.” Healing is relational, it takes time.¹ She quotes Brene Brown as saying, I went to church thinking it would be like an epidural, that it would take the pain away... but church isn’t like an epidural, it’s like a midwife...” It doesn’t take away the pain and discomfort. Instead, faith sits with you in the midst of it².

The healing we are called to participate in is not the stuff of sci-fi, it’s not a mist that works instantaneously. Unfortunately, most often it is not a touch that instantly banishes the fever and restores life. Instead, the healing we’re called to participate in is the slow, hard work of walking with. One-on-one, and as a community of faith. Micro and macro levels. to slowly, surely, heal ourselves, and heal the world. to slowly, and surely, build the kingdom of God.

¹ Evans, Rachel Held, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, leaving, and finding the church*. Nelson Books: Nashville, TN, 2015, pp 208-209.

² Brown, Brene, “Jesus Wept” video, *The Work of the People*, theworkofthepeople.com, qtd. by Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, p.209.