

THE HARDER HEALING

Scriptures: Mark 2:1-12; James 5:13-16

When I was 11 years old I had appendicitis. I started throwing up in the middle of the night and kept it up almost every half hour until morning. The next day when my mother took me to the emergency room, I was still throwing up, only by then, of course, it was the dry heaves. Finally the doctor came in. At that point I did not care what the doctor did to me. When he said I needed surgery to take out my appendix, it was fine with me. I did not care what he did, as long as he made the pain and nausea go away. But if the doctor had said to me at that moment, “Son, your sins are forgiven,” I think I would have thrown up on him.

I wonder if the paralyzed man felt that way. Or his friends. Somehow I doubt that his friends carried him all the way to Jesus, hauled him up on to the roof, tore off the shingles, and let him down through the ceiling right into Jesus’ lap, so that Jesus could say, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Forgiveness is not what they were looking for.

So why does Jesus say that? Is Jesus saying that illness or paralysis is the result of sin? There is another story in John, chapter 9, where Jesus encounters a man born blind, and the disciples say to Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” The disciples are thinking that illness or blindness must be the result of sin, only in this case they are a little confused. How could the man’s blindness be the result of sin when he was born that way? So they figure it must have been the parents’ sin. When in doubt, blame the parents. But Jesus replies, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” For Jesus illness and disability are not the result of sin. They are simply a part of life, but they are not the end of the story. Even in cases of illness and disability, God can still work in our lives to bring about good.

But physical healing is not the only good that God wants to do in our lives. When we have the prayers of the people on Sunday morning, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the prayers are for physical healing—getting rid of cancer, infection or some other disease, or healing injuries from an accident. These prayers are not wrong. When I had appendicitis, I wanted physical healing. I did not want theology. I did not want a sympathetic pastor. I wanted a doctor to make me feel good again. But you know, after I had my appendix out and started feeling better, I discovered that wasn’t all I needed. Physical healing is good, but it is not all we need. Sometimes the more important healing, the harder healing, is of our hearts.

There is a short independently produced movie that I have shown in this and other congregations called *Come Back*. It begins with a well dressed man driving a sports car who roars around a truck stopped at an intersection, not realizing that a young girl is crossing the street in front of the truck. When he sees the girl, he slams on his brakes, but he is too late. He hits the girl, seriously injuring her. For the rest of the movie the man goes around explaining his innocence to everyone—I mean everyone! He plays tennis, and repeatedly during the game he stops to tell his tennis partner what happened and how he tried to avoid hitting the girl. He goes out on a date, but all he can talk about is what happened. He keeps explaining his innocence over and over again. He does the same thing when he is talking with co-workers at his office or

when he goes out jogging with a friend. The man can walk and run and play tennis, but he is effectively paralyzed. He can't sleep, he can't eat, he looks terrible, and so he finally goes to a psychiatrist. He tells the psychiatrist that the police and the insurance company have cleared him of all responsibility. The psychiatrist says, "Then legally, you should be able to sleep at night." But he can't, and finally, near the end of the movie, he goes to the hospital to see the little girl. He walks into her room holding a clump of flowers, and the girl says, "You're the man driving the car, aren't you?" "Yes," he says, wiping his eyes, "I'm so sorry." Then girl smiles and says, "I'm glad you came." And there in that hospital room, the man finally begins to feel that his life is set right again. He is forgiven and accepted by the only person who is in a position to forgive him—the little girl he has hurt.

Never underestimate the importance of forgiveness. You may think that all you really need is physical healing or a better job or a nicer house or a little more money. But don't underestimate the possibility that what you really need, what we all really need, is forgiveness.

But here is the problem. You can only be forgiven by the person you have hurt. The tennis partner could not forgive the man. Neither could his girlfriend or his co-workers or even the psychiatrist. You can only be forgiven by the person you have hurt, and that is where forgiveness can be tough. What about the person who has died and can't forgive you? Or the people who are living and won't forgive you? Or the problems that are so big or so complicated you don't even know from whom to ask forgiveness? Perhaps God can forgive you, but what human being has the right to forgive you, unless that person is the one you have hurt? Unless that person has taken on himself the pain and alienation that you have caused in this world? Do you see why the scribes might have been upset with Jesus?

Several years ago in the *Wall Street Journal*, Dennis Prager, wrote an article objecting to the loose and casual way that Christians talk about forgiveness. He said,

You and I have no right, religiously or morally, to forgive Timothy McVeigh [the Oklahoma City bomber] or Michael Carneal [the high school student in Kentucky who killed three teenage girls at his school]; only those they sinned against have that right—and those they murdered are dead and therefore cannot forgive them. (Indeed, that is why I believe that humans cannot forgive a murderer.) If we are automatically forgiven no matter what we do—even if we do not repent—why repent? In fact, if we forgive everybody for all the evil they do to anybody, God and his forgiveness are entirely unnecessary. Those who forgive all evil done to others have substituted themselves for God (*Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 16, 1997).

That is exactly what the scribes say to Jesus in our scripture reading. "Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

Notice Jesus' response. He does not argue with them. Instead he says, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk?'" Let me pose the same question for you. Which is easier? On the one hand it is easier to say that your sins are forgiven. Who can prove you wrong? Forgiveness is easy to talk about.

Anyone can *talk* about forgiveness. But which is the harder thing to *do*? Is it harder to heal a broken leg or a broken heart? Is it harder to get rid of an infection, or to get rid of bitterness?

When Jesus heals the paralyzed man, he does the easier thing, which is visible, in order to show us that he can do the harder thing, which is invisible. This is true of almost all Jesus' miracles. When Jesus gives sight to the blind man in John, chapter 9, he does it as a sign that he is the light of the world. He does the easier visible miracle (restoring sight) as a sign that he can do the harder invisible miracle (bringing light and life to the world).

And here is the good news: Jesus can also bring forgiveness and healing to your life. In a sense, Dennis Prager is right. Only those we have hurt have the right to forgive. But at the heart of the Christian faith is the extraordinary truth that somehow, in a way that we cannot explain, all the sins that we have ever done to anyone have fallen on Jesus. When Jesus died on that cross, rejected by everyone, even God, he accepted on himself the consequences, the pain, the injustice and injury of an entire alienated world. I cannot prove to you philosophically how that is possible. I can only say that it must be true because God raised up the paralytic and later God raised up Jesus himself, and God would not have done that if Jesus were a fraud.

Which brings me to our Service of Wholeness. In our first scripture lesson James says, "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord." That is what we will do in our church service today. We will invite you to come forward, any of you who want to come, and ask prayer for any healing you need in your life. If you want, you can write your need on the slip of paper in the bulletin, bring it up, and hand it to the minister or elder at the front, who will pray for that specific need as he or she anoints your forehead with oil. But you may also come forward without any piece of paper and the minister or elder will pray a general prayer of healing for you as you are anointed with oil, and God will certainly know the need that is on your heart.

But notice what the next verse says: "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who had committed sins will be forgiven." You see, physical healing is not the only kind of healing we need. When you come up here for prayer and anointing with oil, God may not deal only with your physical problems. God may also work on other kinds of healing in your life: healing of relationships, healing of hurt, healing of your heart. Doctors and medicines can do certain kinds of healing. But Jesus can do the harder healing, if you let him. It may take time. It may not even be finished in this life. James says, "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up." The healing that God wants to do in you may not be finished in this life, but it can begin in this life. Because Jesus can do the harder healing, if you let him.

- Ken Onstot
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