

**Healing and Wholeness: Biblical Reflections**  
by  
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In his book, *Jesus As Healer*, New Testament scholar Harold Remus tells us that Jesus was not the only healer of his time. When treatment of physicians failed, those afflicted turned to alternative medicines or to renowned healers of their day.

A basic pattern common to the healing stories at the Asclepius temple in Greece, in the gospels, and in other ancient sources is as follows: (1) a description of the illness and the suffering caused by such illness, (2) the approach to the healer, (3) the immediate healing, and (4) proof of the healing. Illnesses separated the afflicted from the community and in so doing further exhausted the emotional, financial, moral and spiritual resources of those afflicted.

The Markan account of the healing of the hemorrhaging woman (Mark 5:24-34) aptly shows such a pattern amidst descriptions of bodily details. For twelve years (allusion to the twelve tribes of Israel?), this woman had suffered under the hands of physicians seeking a cure for her flow of blood. Bleeding for so many years left the woman totally exhausted: financially “she had spent all she had”; emotionally and spiritually, she was declared unclean (Lev. 15:25) and thus was socially and religiously isolated. The word that Mark uses for “suffering” under the hands of physicians is the same word that he uses to speak of Jesus’ suffering in the passion. Totally spent, she could have been seen as almost dead. Yet, “having heard about Jesus” she desperately dared to act on the only hope she had left. “If I touch even the hem of his garment, I shall be made well” (Mk. 5:28). Aware that what she was about to do would make Jesus unclean, the woman

nevertheless comes from behind and touches his garment. “And immediately the bleeding ceased; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease” (5:30)

What is astonishing here is not that the cure followed contact with, Jesus (that is indeed, remarkable), but her bodily conviction, her knowing through her body (the proof of the cure) that she was healed, made whole. Theologian Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel notes that the woman’s strength now remains within her and does not continuously flow out of her, whereas Jesus’ strength flows out of him as he was “aware that power had gone out from him.” She is empowered to claim her body, her self, her wholeness as Jesus’ healing energies effected her claim.

“Who touched my garments?” Jesus asks. The woman comes forward and falls down in fear and trembling (emotions often noted whenever one approaches the Holy One or God) and tells him the whole truth. Moltmann-Wendel further asserts that through her Jesus experiences the truth about his capacities, about his human body filled with divine powers, with life-giving energies that he can communicate to others. And in so doing, Jesus breaks through the taboos of his time and tradition. Then Jesus interprets the healing event by going beyond an individual framework to give a corporate understanding to his healing/saving mission: “Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, *shalom*, in wholeness.” Here is a direct allusion to the Old Testament expectations of *shalom*, the health and wholeness promised to the Daughter of Zion (Jer.8:19ff; 33:6; Is. 62:11) after her suffering has ended. Healing of individual bodies entails restoring them to community. What involves individual bodies also pertains to social bodies. The social order was affected by Jesus’ healing of this woman.

While Jesus was not the only renowned healer of his time, early followers of Jesus were quick to show Jesus' superiority to other healers. What made Jesus unique was that, contrary to other healers, he also was a brilliant teacher. "He taught in their synagogues and everyone praised him" (Lk 4:15). He himself understood his mission to be one of restoring humans and the created order to the fullness of life: "I have come so that you may have life and have it abundantly" (Jn. 10:10). He would do this through bringing good news to the poor, binding up the wounds of the brokenhearted, releasing captives, giving sight to the blind and freeing the oppressed (Is. 61:1; Luke 18-22) and thereby announce that "the kingdom of God was close at hand (Mk. 1:14-15). Indeed, Jesus' words are powerful commands: illnesses, corpses, and demons obey. His healing deeds reinforced his teaching, and his teaching disclosed the meaning of his healings. Through gestures, material means (spittle and soil), touch, and authoritative word, Jesus was making real, making present the saving power of God.

Accordingly, this powerful healer and teacher provoked opposition among the Jewish leaders. They accused Jesus of associating with "tax collectors and sinners" (Lk.15:12), of healing on the Sabbath and giving directives to 'work' on the Sabbath (pick ears of corn; carry one's pallet); of promoting outrageous ideas about inviting the poor, crippled, lame and blind to the banquet and relegating to lower seats those who seek choice places. All such reversals anticipate the greatest reversal of all: the powerful healer of individual and social ills ends up powerless in the hands of his opponents. No other healer in Jesus' era was scourged, crucified, and buried as a shameful outcast.

Indeed, Jesus boldly asserted that his mission was about revealing God's life-giving ways through his healings, teachings, and bearing in his own body the wounds of our brokenness, sin, and death so that we may have fullness of life, participate in God's

*shalom*. God desires our abundant wholeness in all dimensions of life: physical, emotional, social, moral, spiritual. What does this mean for health and wholeness today?

First, as pastoral theologian Ralph Underwood has noted, health is a way of being, and healing is any movement toward the abundant life set before us in Jesus Christ. Illness, then, is any movement leading toward alienation, disintegration, and destruction. As we live between the times, between the promises made in Jesus Christ and their final fulfillment, we struggle with these forces of life and death in us and in our communities and nations. It is faith -- confidence in God's promises and faithfulness -- that continually orients us toward the good, empowering life-giving choices. Second, healing is to be understood as process and as event. We are all moving toward the ever greater wholeness that God wants to give us individually and corporately. Each day natural healing processes are at work in our bodies and in our communities as we open to God's life-giving ways. Sometimes these processes are speeded up to such an extent that one experiences healing as an event, such as in the story of the hemorrhaging woman, or in the stories of those addicted or afflicted in body, mind, or spirit recalling the time and place of their deliverance. Many then bear witness to the ways that God brings life from death and joy from suffering. Third, healing in one dimension of our lives (physical, emotional, spiritual) subtly or powerfully affects other dimensions. Many people, once diagnosed with a terminal illness, begin to experience life more fully by living with sharpened awareness both of life's preciousness and precariousness. Finally, all healing returns us to our human condition while yet being a sign of the fullness of God's saving love. Restored to a temporary health, we may engage ever more deeply in obeying God's

life-giving ways as human beings who eventually die. Yet, I have witnessed that those persons who embrace their dying as moving toward a greater wholeness, toward life abundant, experience their dying and death as the final healing touch of their Risen Lord.

References:

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