

Psalm 41

- ¹Happy are those who consider the poor;^[a]
the LORD delivers them in the day of trouble.
- ²The LORD protects them and keeps them alive;
they are called happy in the land.
You do not give them up to the will of their enemies.
- ³The LORD sustains them on their sickbed;
in their illness you heal all their infirmities.^[b]
- ⁴As for me, I said, "O LORD, be gracious to me;
heal me, for I have sinned against you."

Matthew 9

- ⁹As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.
- ¹⁰And as he sat at dinner^[a] in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting^[b] with him and his disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹²But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."
- ³⁵Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. ³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Matthew 10

10 Then Jesus^[a] summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. ²*These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus;*^[b] ⁴*Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.*

⁵These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'^[c] ⁸Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers,^[d] cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. ⁹Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, ¹⁰no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. ¹¹Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. ¹²As you enter the house, greet it. ¹³If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. ¹⁴If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

Imperial Power is Bad for Your Health

Kerra Becker English

Jesus said: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick do.”

Then he told them to go figure out what it means when he says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice. I have come to call, not the righteous, but sinners.”

Matthew tells story after story of Jesus offering healing. Healing stories are not uncommon in the gospels, but Matthew stacks them up one on top of the other. Jesus is known to cure crowds of people who gather around him of every disease and sickness, those possessed by demons and who are suffering from epilepsy or paralyzed. He healed lepers, Peter’s mother-in-law, the Gerasene demoniac, and the paralyzed man he tells to “stand up and walk.” He raises a girl from her death bed, cures blindness, and gives speech to a mute person.

After Matthew records all of these stories in just a couple chapters, he tells his readers that Jesus called his disciples together and granted them full authority over unclean spirits, and for them to cure every disease and sickness. He then sent them out with instructions. The instructions we typically remember are that the disciples go in pairs and travel light. What we might forget is that he also gave them a very particular job. Preach that the kingdom of heaven isn’t sometime in the distant future – it’s absolutely RIGHT HERE, and RIGHT NOW. And then cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons. Preach and heal. That’s the ministry he sent them to do. Following that, Jesus tells them to expect graciousness and hospitality – but if they don’t receive a hot meal and a place to lay their head – just shake the dust off your sandals and keep on moving.

This is one powerful charge. As a Presbyterian pastor, a trained follower of Jesus, I have been known to preach, but my training did NOT include curing the sick, raising the dead, and casting out demons. Folks ask me to pray for them when they are sick. That's about it. And when they are sick – they turn to doctors, nurses, counselors, and hospitals for the care that they need. I do too. I am not known for my medical expertise, and even more so than that, I've been taught mostly about *caution* in my healing prayers. I pray knowing that some outcomes will be everything we hope them to be and other outcomes will leave us struck with loss and grief when a cure is not possible. My prayers are not prayed in a spirit of certainty – that in the name of Jesus – the cancer will go away, or the demons will go quiet. I've seen those prayers go oh so wrong, and it has made me skeptical when TV evangelists or other likely charlatans claim the power to heal on the spot. But even though those practices and promises makes me squirm, I still find myself curious as to why this was such an urgent part of Jesus' ministry. Matthew isn't the ONLY gospel to tell these stories. ALL the gospels tell healing stories with Jesus at the very center.

What I am learning though is that Matthew tells these stories in a particular way, a way that might be quite valuable to us as we think about the need for healing now, in our own present pandemic time-scape while we are wondering if it is truly the kingdom of God or the apocalypse coming near. In Matthew's gospel, those who need and receive Jesus' healing are always on the margins of society, and those who prevent people from living their full lives are very much a part of the Empire, in this case, the Roman Empire. This is at least the premise of one New Testament scholar, Warren Carter. Carter argues, correctly I believe, that the Empire's theology and the theology on the margins are strikingly different. The Empire, the dominant powerful force, he says, promises to bring well-being to a submissive world through peace, safety, and human

protection, not true justice for all. I love it that Carter seems to be a *Star Wars* fan as well – pitting the power of the evil Empire against the scrappy rebellion of Jesus and his band of disciples. This religious mythology of vast evil powers crumbling due to a small band of players seeking goodness has deep roots in ancient civilizations and holds out a new hope for those who would be called to be future members of the resistance.

In his book *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* Warren Carter makes the sociological and theological claim that *imperial power is bad for your health*. Jesus brought healing into those spaces where the imperial power created imbalances of every kind. This is also the Jesus who launches into his mountaintop ministry with the radical claim that God’s blessing will be granted fully to the poor, the sorrowful, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the persecuted and the powerless. Those on the margins are always the ones most at risk. He says that Jesus heals precisely those people MADE SICK by the imperial system. As Carter describes life on the margins, it might sound familiar to you. He says that city life among the non-elite means poverty, squalor, and misery caused by things like poor nutrition, an inadequate food supply, excessive work, poor or non-existent sanitation, overcrowded living conditions, and contaminated water. The elite on the other hand extracted a significant percentage of peasant production in taxes and tribute, sold food at high profits, and secured their own wealth and comfort at the expense of the non-elite who could not afford improved housing, or sanitation, or leisure. The very diseases caused by this should also sound like the backbone of biblical healing stories: skin conditions, blindness, poor bone development, weak immunity to germs, and mental instability. These are all the conditions Jesus spent a good portion of his ministry aiming to heal and solve. (Carter, *Matthew and Empire*, p. 70-71)

Jesus isn't just healing people who get sick, he's getting the Empire and those who benefit from the values system of the Empire to take notice by healing and healing and healing those who are meant to be expendable in the system. And they don't like it one bit. Remember in the way back, seems like eons ago now, when people would get all heated and red in the face about the terrible proposition called "Obamacare?" Jesus is instituting a similar principle – that all people, of all circumstances, deserve the basic conditions that make life livable and more fair for all. He instituted that, not by trying to instill a political system, but by going out to where those people were, taking them by the hand, and making them better. The rich, the elite, the powerful figures that benefitted from the machinations of the Empire did NOT want some radical like Jesus to let those on the margins begin to think that their life had any meaning or value. They were dependent on slave labor, on taking advantage of the bodies that didn't mean much, to be able to afford the luxuries and easy life of their own time and place.

Though I have always been aware of the power and affluence of the United States, until quite recently, I have been blissfully unaware of how that power and affluence were dependent on the same kind of social stratification as we see in the times of the early church. I always believed there was a relatively large middle class – always comfortable but not considered wealthy – that made life fair for the vast majority of people. For a good chunk of my life – that has been my personal experience, and my enclosed bubble. For those a generation or two ahead of me, you might even feel that more as beneficiaries of structures designed to support a strong middle-class economy. But our system is currently being exposed for the Empire that it has grown to be. Rome looks pretty good when you are a Roman. The United States has looked amazing to those who have benefitted the most from her vast resources and human ingenuity. But now it is

becoming clear that there are those in the US fueled by the same greed to concentrate the power and affluence in a smaller and smaller number of individual people at the expense of all the rest.

We too are an unhealthy nation, and a lot of the illness and disease is concentrated on the margins. Marginalized people have always been sicker than those who can afford good food, a safe place to live, and quality health care. Jesus came to stand beside those who were born into circumstances that aren't so lucky. I hope you will take the time to consider where Jesus' ministry of healing would begin today. We are living through a pandemic, with record unemployment (that brings with it a lack of medical insurance), and it is still true that our citizens stuck in urban over-crowding, or decimated by rural poverty are at risk of all the same kinds of diseases and untimely deaths.

Just yesterday, a story broke in Seattle of a man who survived COVID opening a 181-page hospital bill for \$1.1 million dollars in costs. If you got sick today, could you afford the care to survive? That's the question some folks are asking themselves. Empires design systems that account for human beings being not just casualties, but completely expendable. To have politicians, with a straight face, ask for grandparents to go to work, so the next generation can survive is ludicrous. Especially in a country where there is vast wealth – but not particularly great distribution of that wealth.

For the most part, I think people would agree that there's a problem. What's more difficult is trying to figure out how to solve that problem. The healing that Jesus and his disciples were able to do seems miraculous to us. We don't know if they had access to medical skills we don't know about, or if God saw to it in that day and age that Jesus could rub mud in someone's eyes and make them see again. Me going back to school for medical training isn't likely. It's not my skill set, nor would my stomach handle it well. However, what I do think these texts tell us is that God

is looking out for the marginalized, and that the followers of Jesus, yet today need to have eyes open to the problem, and brains and hearts willing to work toward doing something about it. Jesus healed on the margins, and was killed by the Empire. That's the story Matthew is sharing with us – if we are willing to hear it. Those who were poor already and those who are finding themselves on the precipice of poverty waiting for jobs to come back need allies working for systemic change so that together we can get healthy and stay healthy. Then we also need to take a hard look at the call of Matthew the tax collector. Jesus also called those who were skimming off the system for their own well being to take a hard look at themselves and change their ways. We are in a situation now where things are so devastating, perhaps we can be open to more change than ever before. We need the boldness that comes from this gospel narrative, now more than ever.

So I ask, where are you willing to go to follow Jesus when he asks you to heal the sick, and raise the dead, and cast out demons? Amen.