

In the Footsteps of the Lord, Part Three: "The Healer"  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020 (Transfiguration Sunday)  
by Foster Freed

Matthew 4: 23-25

He came as a prophet...and would have been recognized as such by his contemporaries. He came as a herald...proclaiming the advent, the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven: placing the Kingdom at the centre of his prophetic ministry. And yes: as this morning's brief Gospel reading makes clear: he came as a healer, one whose prophetic words were accompanied by deeds of power, one whose heralding of the Kingdom was put on display through the work of healing.

Nor, it should be noted, was this entirely unprecedented. Standing at the very fount of the Hebraic prophetic tradition—long before Amos and Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel—stand the figures of Elijah and Elijah's disciple Elisha. As depicted in the Old Testament books, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings, the ministries of Elijah and Elisha bear witness to an understanding of the prophet in which prophetic speech is married to prophetic action: deeds of power accompanying words of power. While the healing dimension of their prophetic ministries does not form as pronounced a theme with Elijah and Elisha, there can be no denying the parallels and the fact that Jesus would have been viewed as a prophet cut from the same cloth as the cloth that housed the ministries of Elijah and Elisha. Indeed!

One of the most noteworthy aspects of Jesus as presented in all four Gospels, is the sense we are given that his contemporaries experienced him as someone who spoke and who acted with remarkable authority. Perhaps we too, in our encounter with Jesus, have experienced something similar: a sense that there is something out-of-the-ordinary with this person, whose words and whose deeds are charged with unique power. And yes: given that all of us have at least a wee bit of "Missouri" in our souls...

..."Missouri" is the "show-me" State!...

...it ought not to surprise us that all four Gospels place great emphasis upon Christ's healing miracles which—if nothing else—are a tangible witness to the authority he bears. Even John's Gospel which prefers to speak of them not as "miracles" but as signs is no exception. No wonder...no wonder here in Matthew's Gospel, we learn—right after learning of Christ's proclamation of the Kingdom—that the ministry he launches is a ministry in which healing is freely offered. *...he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and...*

...notice the close connection Matthew draws between the proclamation of the kingdom and the healing work of the prophet Jesus....

*...proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom **and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.** Nor did that go unnoticed. On the contrary. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him!*

Do those “great crowds” come as a surprise? The more things change, the more they stay the same. Then as now: we may not be eager to hear the prophet’s word of rebuke, but we’ll line up for miles to experience the work of The Healer.

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In many ways...Matthew’s Gospel presents an intriguing test-case, as to the universality of Jesus’ renown as a healer. Why do I make that claim?

Largely...largely because Matthew is especially interested in presenting Jesus as a teacher. As we’ll discover next Sunday, Matthew’s Gospel is organized around five blocks of teaching material. And yes: we are not wrong-headed to suspect that we hear in those five blocks of teaching echoes of the Five Books of Moses.

At any rate: three of Matthew’s teaching blocks occupy roughly one chapter each; two of them—the first and the last—are far more substantial, occupying three chapters each. And yes—the first of those teaching blocks—the Sermon on the Mount—is rightly regarded as one of the most beautifully crafted sermons ever to have been crafted: truly one of the most beautifully inspired texts to be found not only in the Bible, but in any of the world’s religious literature. For Matthew, Jesus—first and foremost—is a teacher, which is why—having noted the crowds that follow him because of his healing ministry at the end of his fourth chapter, Matthew immediately launches not into a further depiction of his healing ministry, rather launches into the Sermon on the Mount, postponing his more detailed presentation of the work of Jesus the Healer. But eventually...

...to be precise, as soon as the Sermon on the Mount ends...

...we are shown Jesus in the midst of his healing work: cleansing a leper, healing the servant of a Roman soldier, healing Simon Peter’s mother-in-law as well as many of her friends and neighbours, calming a storm...

...that too is an act of healing, given the danger that storm poses to those out on the water....

...healing two men with demons, healing a paralytic, healing a woman suffering with a flow of blood, restoring a little girl—who appears to have died—back to the land of the living, then healing two blind men as well as a man unable to speak. All of it...all of it long before we have even reached the half-way point

of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew's fascination, you see, with Jesus the Teacher in no way dissuades him from presenting a full-bodied, full-blooded portrait of Jesus the Healer.

And here—at this juncture—permit me to make two important points: points we dare not overlook even though they are both fairly obvious. First is the fact that Jesus' healing ministry is a ministry of love. Obvious though that may be...some might label it something of a cliché...just the same, the fact remains: to the extent Jesus comes as a prophet—an authentic prophet entitled to speak and act on behalf of God—it should be obvious that his actions befit one who comes on behalf of a God who not only loves us, but appears even to like us: which is actually a much more astonishing feat! Jesus the Healer represents the God of love...an obvious observation but one we dare not overlook: an observation that needs to be joined to a second observation concerning the unavoidably “materialistic” nature of the work undertaken and the witness borne by this Jesus. So often we are embarrassed by the “materialistic” dimension of Christian faith: a tradition which, at times, insists on graphic descriptions of the physical ailments we human beings undergo, includes stories that insist that the two key mysteries that shape our faith involve the birth of a baby and the bloody death of that baby some 30 odd years later, as well as sacraments that use such ordinary objects as water, bread and wine: all of it thoroughly grounded in this physical realm we inhabit. Sometimes we appear to think—especially we Protestants!—that we have outgrown all of that; that we crave something more spiritual, something more rarified. But the God who created this physical realm—this unmistakably material realm—and pronounced it “good”, clearly cares not just about our “spiritual” well-being, but about our “physical” well-being as those who have yet to graduate from the “material” realm. Thus the prophet arrives with “healing on his wings”: comes to us not only as Jesus the prophet, but as Jesus the Healer, restoring broken bodies, cleansing defiled hearts and minds, healer of our every ill! Glory be!

If only I could leave it there!

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On more than one occasion I have made reference to a brilliant scene in Woody Allen's fine film: *Hannah and Her Sisters*. In that film Allen plays a hypochondriac; I suspect that is an instance of type-casting! At any rate, his character is someone continually visiting his doctor with all kinds of perceived symptoms which inevitably turn out to be all in his head. Early on in the film, however—when Allen sees his doctor over some mild ringing in his ears—his doctor rather than following the familiar script of assuring Allen that all is well and he should go home, instead tells him that he needs to run some tests because something doesn't seem quite right. Well: now the hypochondriac has something to fixate on, and for the next while he goes from test to test to test, certain that he is about to be given a bleaj diagnosis. Lo and behold, when all the tests are in, and the doctor sits him down for the big reveal...

...and Allen, of course, is preparing for the worst...

...the doctor presents him with the wonderful news that there is nothing wrong: he is given a clean bill of health and told to go out and live his life. And so we next see Allen running—almost dancing—down Fifth Avenue, overjoyed to discover that his worst fears have evaporated, ready to embrace life, ready to live with courage and enthusiasm when he suddenly stops in his tracks and wonders:

“Why am I so happy? Today the news was good! But eventually I am going to die”. And, of course, this being a Woody Allen film, he is launched into a very funny existential crisis, that even includes a brief flirtation with the possibility of becoming a member of the Hare Krishna organization. It’s quite delightful.

Quite delightful...but also quite sobering. Quite sobering, in that it reveals an underlying truth about all of the healing we receive within the life of this world: whether that healing comes to us through the loving care of doctors and nurses, or whether it comes to us directly through the touch of Jesus the Healer. After all: even Lazarus, having been restored to life, was still facing death: still had death in front of him, as did all of the others who received healing and restoration and resuscitation at the hands of this Jesus. Yes, he had truly “fixed” them all. But these were temporary fixes, fixes that would eventually give way to renewed brokenness...renewed brokenness which—without exception—would eventually lead to the grave: for each and every one of **them**, no less than for each and every one of us. That’s a truth you really can take to the bank! Even taxes can be evaded by the truly privileged and the truly determined...but death...death may sometimes take a holiday, but it always finds us in the end.

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Maybe...just maybe...John knew—as evidenced by the Gospel that bears his name...

...maybe John knew why there was profound wisdom in referring to Jesus’ miracles as “signs” rather than as miracles. Without diminishing their power as miracles—as miraculous offerings of healing love—it’s hard to deny just how fragile they remain in light of the death we all die. But if we regard them as signs...

...as signposts that seek to direct our attention to something far more dramatic and far more all encompassing...

...that is when they begin to make claims that go far beyond a temporary fix. Indeed! To view these discrete acts of healing love from the vantage point of this Sunday, a Sunday set apart to commemorate Jesus on the Mountain Peak...

...to commemorate Jesus’ Transfiguration...

...to regard his acts of healing from that vantage point, is to regard these discrete acts not merely in light of the Transfiguration of one human person...

...we call him Jesus!...

...but in light of the promise his Transfiguration holds for us: those whose healing in **this** world, is filled with the promise of ultimate healing, the ultimate transfiguration, the ultimate transformation of each and of all: those who (to paraphrase John), will see him as he is and therefore discover to their astonishment that they have become like him.<sup>i</sup> Thereby learning to respond to present healing, including the healing wrought by Jesus the Healer, not merely with joy...

...not that joy is a bad thing...

...but to respond with something even more wonderful than joy, namely hope. Not just joy for this time and place, as wonderful as that experience of joy can be. Not merely joy in the here and now! But today's joy as a sign of eternity's joys: grounded in the hope that the "power-to-love" revealed in and through these acts of healing, are no passing fancy, but serve as potent reminders that God wasn't messing around in pronouncing creation good way back in the beginning, but was also announcing unshakeable determination to thereafter do whatever it would take—holding nothing back—that the good might triumph, that blessing and healing, light and life and love might have the final word and the last hurrah!

*So his fame spread...and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him!*

May we too follow! In the name of Jesus! Thanks be to God!!

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<sup>i</sup> 1 John 3:2