



“Trees Walking”

Westminster Presbyterian Church

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Mark 8: 22-25

by the Rev. Dr. Stacy C. Smith

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, God our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Good morning again to all of you and thank you so much for the wonderful welcome I have received in Auburn. I am so grateful to be here and thankful to all of you for making it feel like home. We're all still getting to know each other so I wasn't exactly sure exactly where I should start thinking of a sermon this Sunday. So I decided to just go what is probably my favorite story of Jesus, definitely my favorite healing miracle, and begin there.

So our scripture this morning is this healing miracle from the Gospel of Mark, which is an interesting place to look for healing miracles. Because Mark's overall tone in his gospel is somewhat anti-miracle. He affirms that miracles happen but he's not particularly interested in saying too much about them. In fact, Mark isn't particularly interested in saying too much about anything. He's the shortest of the Gospel writers by far, so he doesn't use ten words when one will do fine, and he doesn't dwell too much on superfluous details.

And this to-the-point tone is most evident in this story. And like I said, I think this is the most amazing healing miracle in Scripture. Now, almost no one agrees with me. The other gospel writers, for example, they don't seem to like it because Mark is the only place where we find this story. The other gospel writers don't mention it at all. The Early Church didn't really like it either. They either don't mention this kooky little tale, or they don't spend much time on the overall healing and instead focus on the finer points of detail. For example, Thomas Aquinas spends a good deal of time discussing spit, literally the spittle that Jesus puts on the man's eyes within the passage. I promise you, we will not be discussing that in depth today. But it's not just the ancient folks; modern theologians take a pass on this story as well; we almost never read it in church.

But I love this weird story. First and foremost, I think I like it because the when the man says that he sees people but they look like trees walking, I always think of the ents, from *The Lord of the Rings*. You remember those? They're these huge tree-like creatures that are the guardians of the forest in Middle Earth. Every time I heard about "trees walking" my mind immediately flashes to Treebeard and the other ents, and I envision a whole forest of walking, talking trees. Which is of course cool in my mind, but if I was the man being healed and that's what I was seeing, I might have been tempted to tell Jesus, um yeah, everything looks fine, when of course, it does not.

But aside from the ents or even the spit, the thing I actually like most about this story is that it is so different on its own. Because in this healing, Jesus has to heal the man twice. We have no other account in Scripture of there being a process involved in Jesus' healings. In every other circumstance he spoke the word or touched the sick, and instantly the person was made whole. But in this one, Jesus does not seem to get it right the first time.

And all those other miracle stories might inspire you, but at least on their face, they almost never inspire me. In fact, I find myself frustrated that a miraculous physical healing can happen instantly for people in the Bible, but that they almost never happen for the people I know and love. If God could heal a woman's hemorrhaging or restore sight to the blind, why couldn't God take away my husband's brain tumor or switch off his alcoholism? And though I am new to this congregation, I know that all of us have some illness or challenge, either in ourselves or with those that we love, and we pray fervently for God's healing and wholeness, which sometimes comes, but also doesn't. And so wouldn't it be easier, more loving, if God would just consistently do the thing that we pray would happen, that we believe God can do, to heal us of all that harms us? Doesn't that feel like a reasonable request, given the stories we read in scripture? I tell you, I have trouble with these healing miracles.

But this one is different. This one is weird and messy and doesn't quite fit, which frankly feels more like my life. But why? Why does this healing happen in this way? Well the scholars who have taken a look at this scripture typically say one of two things about why Jesus had to heal the man twice: either there was something seriously wrong with the man, or there was something wrong with Jesus' healing.

On one hand, perhaps this man was so sinful, or so blind, that his healing didn't quite take the first time. Jesus had to have a do-over for this sinner, maybe because Jesus was trying to prove his powers and bring this man to faith. Aquinas says, "But the reason why he did not see at once perfectly, but in part, was, that he had not perfect faith; for

healing is bestowed in proportion to faith.”¹ So maybe, they seem to say, maybe this blind man was super-duper sinful, and it took a little extra to bring this plus-size sinner back to the fold.

Now, the other option is that maybe Jesus did not have enough power to do this miracle. Perhaps he had reached a stage in his ministry where opposition to him was so intense, and hostility so increased, that his power was not quite adequate. Perhaps he was exhausted by the disciples who never seem to get what he was saying. Whatever the reason, this theory essentially says, Jesus was tired and it took a double dose in order to accomplish the healing.

To me, both of these answers are pretty silly. Jesus heals many sinners in his ministry, and there is no indication that this man was a particularly tough case. And I have to believe that the healing power of Jesus was not based on how he was feeling that day. Jesus’ power is not a video game, where he charges up his “Healing Power” by collecting points or coins or mushrooms, and loses power by spending them. Jesus is God, our Holy Creator on Earth among us, and if he has the power to raise the dead, I believe that he also has the power to heal anyone at anytime, and to do so fully and completely.

But that still leaves us with the question: why the two healings? Perhaps Mark is not trying to tell us something about miracles – he’s not particularly interested in the “how” or “why” of miracles anyway - but is trying to tell us something about the nature of healing. For us, healing is not one miracle, one moment, one opportunity for deliverance. It is not a flash when everything finally clicks together. It is not a bad MRI one day and an inexplicably good one the next. There is almost never a magic cloak to touch, or a mighty hand that can rip that demon out of us once and for all.

Instead, God’s healing is more like this process of trial and error, one in which we bring all of our illnesses, our deficits, our brokenness, our sin to God over and over again. To receive God’s healing power we must be honest about what we see, we must have the confidence to say, “I can see something, but it doesn’t look quite right. Not yet.” God’s miracles are not delivered in a one-shot, take it or leave it deal with God, and thank God for that. No, God’s love is a continual flow of grace after grace after grace, and slowly, things come into focus.

I think we are experiencing this process of healing here at Westminster right now. I think it can be sort of tempting to say, well, God initially blessed this church a long time ago when there were more of us, more children or weddings or babies or baptisms or money or interest, more of God’s blessing, and it might feel like that initial blessing is

¹ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/catena2.iii.viii.html>

sorta slipping away. But that doesn't reflect anything of what we know of God in the world or what we know about God's healing from this scripture. What we know is that God's healing is a process, it takes many stages. And as we enter this new chapter of blessing and healing in the life of this church, we learn from scripture that while things might be a little murky right now, this continued flow of God's grace will bring things into focus and we will see clearly the path ahead of us, just as God has always done in the life of this congregation.

And what's true for the life of the church is also true for our own lives. Some of you here will know that my husband Kevin died of cancer about three years ago. Kevin knew a lot of brokenness in his life, some of it self-inflicted, some of it not. He was not a person of religious faith, but as his cancer progressed, it became clear that the slow, steady process of a miracle was at work in his life, even as he drew closer and closer to death. Through tough conversations, and honesty, and tears and laughter, Kevin slowly began to forgive himself, and sought forgiveness from others.

I recall the last time he spoke to his oldest son, whom Kevin fathered when he was basically a child himself. He had legions of arguably justifiable guilt about his relationship with Clayton, and he called him just a few weeks before he died to say, "Please son, if there is anything you need to say to me about the things I have done, or not done, for you, please get them off your chest while you can. I don't want to die and leave you with unfinished business." And Clayton replied, "Dad, there is nothing I need to say. I love you and I will miss you. That is all." A healing miracle indeed.

John Calvin says about this passage:

This miracle...appears to have been related by Mark chiefly on account of this circumstance, that Christ restored sight to the blind man, not in an instant, as he was generally accustomed to do, but in a gradual manner... On this account, he does not all at once enlighten the eyes...but communicates to them at first a dark and confused perception, and afterwards, by laying on his hands a second time, enables them to see... And so the grace of Christ, which had formerly been poured out suddenly on others, flowed by drops, as it were, on this man.²

The grace of Christ, which had formerly been poured out suddenly, flowed by drops.

In the short time I have lived with you all in the Finger Lakes, I have observed that this is a place where a drop of rain is always a possibility. As we join in this work of ministry together, I pray that we might know God's love, and grace, and healing miracles, with every soft drop. May it be so, this day and always. Amen.

² <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/cal/mark-8.html>