

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

A couple of weeks ago (to freshen your memories), there was the first part of the story we just heard: Jesus sends out his disciples two by two into the surrounding villages and countryside with a message of repentance--also casting out demons as he has done (what we might think of as various forms of mental suffering), and healing the sick. Now they've returned, presumably eager to debrief with him what they experienced while they were out there on their own. But there are so many people milling around Jesus that it's impossible to talk, so he invites them to come away with him to a deserted place for a while. To rest and have something to eat.

This is one of those places—one of the many, many places—in the gospels where, if we use our five beautiful senses and are open to the Spirit, we can see ourselves as not only somewhat *like* Jesus and his disciples—human beings as they are--but may actually be able to see and feel ourselves there with them on the shores of Lake Geneseret, or Kinnereth, which are other names for the Sea of Galilee. We close our eyes—or leave them open—and imagine the low, green hills and the sandy shoreline with the wooden boat moored alongside; we can smell and taste the fish caught on the way over and cooked now over an open fire.

It doesn't last long, this repose, because when the people discover where he's gone they surround him again and the same thing happens. Always, he is pulled away from his human desire to rest by the compassion that draws him back into the waiting crowds. Looking out over them, he sees them as sheep without a shepherd, and his awareness of their utter dependence on the care and fidelity of a shepherd seems to call out from him the deepest compassion of his heart.

This is interesting to me as a hospital chaplain: that it seems to be the helplessness, the great need of the crowd that draws him out of himself towards them, even though he is tired and would probably like to spend some time alone with his closest circle of followers and friends. I mean, it could be that he simply knows in advance what they need and moves out to meet them before they even know it themselves. But that's not the case in most of the healing stories of the gospels. Almost always, Jesus requires the person desiring healing to tell him what they want. To look him in the eyes and say it. This may seem strange to us—why would a blind or a crippled person need to say what it is they want from him? isn't it obvious?—but this seems to be the case again and again.

And I know I'm not the only one to have wondered whether, in these interactions with the sick and those filled with evil spirits, *there is a need in Jesus himself* to minister to them. Could it be that the healing power of God—which is what Jesus always says it is, he always points beyond himself to its source—could it be that this healing power is not only evoked by human suffering, but on some unimaginable level actually needs that “other” in order to be complete? That the act of healing itself is not so much a one-way gift, but is a sort of call and response?

The idea that God may need us in anything remotely like the way we need God may seem blasphemous to some. It does to me. Surely the God who is all in all, who exists before time and will exist when time is all over, surely this God cannot be incomplete? And yet, our own experiences of healing—all the way from the simplest interactions of our daily lives at one end, the way we heal each other through a kind word, a listening ear, a refusal to judge—right across the spectrum to, maybe, a single dramatic moment on which our entire life seems to turn on a dime—all of these

experiences points us towards just such an unfathomable mystery, a real mutuality of giving and receiving, even with the divine. Could it be that—just a thought—this may be what we, and all of creation, were created *for*? That like a loving mother, God’s continual care and nurturance is something God *must* give, something that has to keep happening out of God’s very nature, even God’s need?

There was a patient at our hospital about 15 years ago, a brilliant professor of some kind at Texas A & M, who suffered from a form of gigantism—though he was not a giant at all, maybe six feet tall, but with big bony hands and feet. We had wonderful conversations—he was a deeply and movingly religious person—and he mentioned to me in passing that one effect of his condition was that he had too much iron in his blood, so that routinely, once a month or so, he would have to have it *drawn off*, to keep his body in balance, to return him to health.

That image stuck in my mind. We may all have had moments—or even long periods of our lives—when we felt this same sense of having too much of something that is ordinarily a good thing—too much love to give, with nowhere for it to go; too much affection or need to be of use, and no immediate outlet for it. So that the cure we longed for required some *receptor*—either another person—a child, spouse, a friend—or some larger purpose or endeavor in which we can at least attempt to give everything we have to give, and have it be received.

Could it be that Jesus is impelled to action by something not unlike this? Again and again, we see that he cannot—or at least does not-- escape

the world of human need that continually presses in on him—he withdraws from it when he can, goes off alone to replenish his spirit with God his Father, but always he is drawn back to those whose need calls out to him. You could say that the various people who approach him with their pressing concerns are what some teachers of the Bible call “importunate”—or as the dictionary would put it, *persistent even to the point of annoyance and intrusion*. And strangely enough to our modern sensibilities, our images of a pastel, wouldn’t-hurt-a-fly Jesus, he commends them for this, if not here, then in other incidents throughout the gospels. What he seems to be saying is that the essence of God’s nature, is not ours, that it’s not governed by the niceties of human decorum. This Jesus is at times fierce, in addition to being compassionate. He’s no pushover. He makes demands—for repentance, for a change of life.

Yet in the midst of it all, he appears to indicate that the very behavior that may seem to us “persistent, even to the point of annoyance”, may in fact be the necessary opening step in the process of healing that must begin, it appears, with us. At the very least, we must *consent* to the healing that is offered, accept it in all its mystery, not asking for an answer, but offering, in return, a change in who we are.

I’ll close with an example not so much of faith healing, as *faith experience*, in which one importunate human soul calls forth from this Jesus a response that both rebukes him and leaves him, in a new way, accepted and whole.

Reynolds Price, whose memoir, [A Whole New Life](#) I have here, is a wonderful American novelist and poet who has written a whole string of

prizewinning books over the last 30 years. He's a southerner, so yes, I'm probably biased. He was born in North Carolina and has hardly left it during his life, except for three years in England as a Rhodes scholar before coming back to teach at Duke University, where he had received his undergraduate degree.

As a young man, Reynolds Price seemed to have it all. He was very smart and good in school, good-looking and grew up surrounded by an extensive, loving family and friends. A fortunate man, indeed. Then one day in the prime of his life at the age of 51, while crossing the campus, the friend he was with pointed out to him what seemed to be an awkward way he was walking, which he hadn't been aware of. He thought nothing of it at first, but when the symptoms grew worse, it was eventually discovered (through a long and painful process he describes with humor and grace) that he had a malignant tumor about the size and length of a pencil growing along his spinal cord, from his hairline down. He had immediate surgery—the best there was—but as this was before lasers or MRI's, the surgeon was only able to get a small percentage of the tumor and had to rely on massive followup doses of radiation in order to save his life. As the result of the radiation, he lost the use of his lower body, permanently, and began to suffer the *intense* and unremitting pain that would not lessen for the next six years.

Well, I'm not going to leave you there, not with that outcome. It's true that Price became then and still remains confined to a wheelchair, but the passage I want to share with you comes before all that, on the morning he wakes in his own bed at home, the day the first of his radiation treatments will begin; the day after he's been told by the doctors that there is a small but significant risk—about 5%--that he will lose the use of his legs. But I'll let him tell it to you in his own words:

“By daylight on July 3rd, morning thoughts of a stiff sobriety were plainly in order. But in the midst of such circular thinking, an actual happening intervened with no trace of warning. I was suddenly not propped in my brass bed or even contained in my familiar house. By the dim new, thoroughly credible light that rose around me, it was barely dawn, and I was lying fully dressed in modern street clothes on a slope by a lake I knew at once. It was the big lake of Kinnereth, the Sea of Galilee, in the north of Israel—green Galilee, the scene of Jesus’ first teaching and healing. I’d paid the lake a second visit the previous October, a twelve-mile long body of fish-stocked water in beautiful hills of grass, trees and small family farms.

Still sleeping around me on the misty ground were a number of men in the tunics and cloaks of first-century Palestine. I soon understood with no sense of surprise that the men were Jesus’ twelve disciples and that he was nearby sleeping among them. So I lay on a while in the early chill, looking west across the lake to Tiberias, a small low town, and north to the fishing villages of Capernaum and Bethsaida. I saw them as they were in the first century—stone huts with thatch-and-mud roofs, occasional low towers, the rising smoke of breakfast fires. The early light was a fine mix of tan and rose. It would be a fair day.

Then one of the sleeping men woke and stood.

I saw it was Jesus, bound toward me. He looked much like the lean Jesus of Flemish paintings—tall with dark hair, unblemished skin and a self-possession both natural and imposing.

Again I felt no shock or fear. All this was normal human event; it was utterly clear to my normal eyes and was happening as surely as any event of my previous life. I lay and watched him walk on nearer.

Jesus bent and silently beckoned me to follow.

I knew to shuck off my trousers and jacket, then my shirt and shorts. Bare, I followed him.

He was wearing a twisted white cloth round his loins; otherwise he was bare and the color of ivory.

We waded out into cool lake water twenty feet from shore till we stood waist-deep.

I was in my body but was also watching my body from slightly upward and behind. I could see the purple dye on my back, the long rectangle that boxed my thriving tumor.

Jesus silently took up handfuls of water and poured them over my head and back till water ran down my puckered scar. Then he spoke once—“Your sins are forgiven”—and turned to shore again, done with me.

I came on behind him, thinking in standard greedy fashion, *It's not my sins I'm worried about*. So to Jesus' receding back I had the gall to say "Am I also cured?"

He turned to face me, no sign of a smile, and finally said two words—"That too.." Then he climbed from the water, not looking round, really done with me.

I followed him and then, with no palpable seam in the texture of time or place, I was home again in my wide bed."

from *A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing*, pp. 42-43.

Reynolds Price, whom I have heard interviewed more than once on the radio, has never varied in the story he tells of this experience: not a dream, not a vision, but in one of his favorite words, a "credible" concrete experience of the healing power of God, mediated through Jesus. Although in the years that followed he was to experience other ordeals even more painful and life-threatening than this one, no similar consolation has ever come to him again. It was enough. The astonishing thing is that, in the book, he says that the five years that have followed his partial recovery from pain, his ability to experience it as "no longer burning up and down his spine but burning somewhere over in the corner"—*that these have been the best years of his life*.

"That, too", Jesus had promised him, when he asked if he would be healed. God has done God's part. Now, in return, the human being gives back, through his changed life, the love and gratitude that—who knows?—may be the reason he was created.

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