

Message: “What’s Permitted?”

Have you ever found yourself praying in a hospital room for yourself or a loved one? I have and many of you have. Guess what? We’re doing the right thing. Studies have shown patients with faith cope better with illness and often heal faster or are more accepting of the outcome than those without. Maybe that’s why nearly 70% of hospitals today invest in spiritual health-care specialists known as chaplains.

Does that percentage surprise you? Surgeons, radiologists, oncologists and nurses are trained in the scientific method and taught every ailment has a physical cause. Yet even they seem to agree faith can make a difference in a patient’s recovery.

How can faith - something unseen, something immeasurable - have a measurable effect? Rev. Sue Wintz, a chaplain for 35 years, offers one example. A young, 19-year-old gang member in Phoenix suffered a gunshot wound to his spinal cord, confining him to a wheelchair for life. His lack of faith had led him into a downward spiral, threatening his recovery.

“His mother and girlfriend couldn’t seem to reach him,” Sue said. “He said he would rather die than face life as a quadriplegic.”¹

She tried to help the young man articulate his despair. They prayed, and she encouraged him to confront difficult spiritual questions:

What did this injury mean for the future?
What did God have in store for him?

The young man’s talks with Sue produced an infusion of hope. Soon he was strong enough mentally, physically and, most important, spiritually to take control of his own recovery. He adapted to life in a wheelchair, got out of the hospital, went back to school and stayed away from gang life.

“That, to me, was a miracle,” Rev. Wintz said. “He didn’t get a physical healing, but he got a spiritual one.”²

¹ <https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/health-and-wellness/healing/spiritual-healing>

² *Ibid*

Stories like these are why people in the medical profession don't dismiss the immeasurable aspects of faith, and perhaps why they're often unsurprised to see miraculous healings. A patient open to belief is a patient open to hope, open to the improbable.

When faith works hand-in-hand with a doctor's care, it's far more likely a patient will follow instructions, strive for recovery milestones and accept the setbacks that might make others give up.

Rev. Florine Thompson says all patients have a "sacred story"³ - something so fundamental to their soul that they won't share it with just anyone. Spiritual caregivers encounter sacred stories every day. They help patients and their loved ones figure out how their sacred story can make sense of an illness, no matter what the outcome. They help us realize the soul transcends the body and healing comes in many forms.

Phillip Yancy captures it succinctly, "I have learned that faith means trusting in advance what will make sense only in reverse."⁴

I'm sharing this story to tell you miraculous healing happens around us, every day. There have been professionally run studies that have concluded there's something going on we don't understand. That means we can trust and believe the accounts of healing we find in the Bible. Not only that, we're invited to join the healing process.

Today's story about a woman who had been suffering and crippled is found in Luke 13:10-17. Some of us can't imagine what that would be like while others know this woman's story well. As I reflected on the passage this week, I was prompted to consider four different views.

There are four actors in this scene: Jesus, the woman, the synagogue leaders and the crowd. Let's spend a few moments looking at what happened from each of their perspectives. It will teach us. All of us fall into at least one of these roles.

First, let's look at Jesus' view. He's traveling around, teaching in homes, on hillsides and in all sorts of gatherings. Jesus is teaching his disciples and the thousands of people who gather. That's a crowd.

³ *Ibid*

⁴ <https://www.guideposts.org/>

Jesus regularly attended church on the Sabbath. One day, he was teaching the congregation. Jesus looked up and saw a woman with a “*spirit that had crippled her She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight*” (v10, NRSV). Jesus saw the woman’s need and he was moved to act and show compassion for her. He invited the woman to come to him and said, “*Woman, you are free!*” (v12, MSG). Then he laid his hands on her.

Suddenly, she stood up straight and began praising God. Alleluia! But that didn’t sit well with the synagogue leaders. They started saying to the congregation, “Come on! We don’t permit this. Don’t disrupt our service” (v14, my paraphrase).

I believe this made Jesus angry. His response is quick and to the point, “*Hypocrites! You show compassion to your animals on the Sabbath. Doesn’t this woman – one of Abraham’s children, deserve the same?*” (vv15-16). You can hear the subtext: God’s house is a house of healing and prayer. Why wouldn’t we help someone? Pass your blessings on.

Jesus saw a need and acted. It was the ultimate teaching moment. Jesus acted according to his nature and mission: teaching people about God’s love, healing them and restoring the community of faith. He was disappointed with the response of congregation and the leaders, yet he kept trying to help them understand what a relationship with God is really like.

Now, let’s shift and consider the woman’s perspective. She’s unnamed. Yeah, men wrote the book. But I wonder if the congregation even knew her name, after all, she’s one of the invisible people, out of sight and out of mind. We don’t know the woman’s age, but she had been crippled for eighteen years. We don’t know whether she had arthritis, scoliosis or some other condition.

What we do get is a sense that the woman’s ailment was depriving her of enjoying or accomplishing what she would like to do. The woman wasn’t just suffering in her body. Her mind and soul were affected. Given her condition, it would have been difficult for her to work or to be part of normal social gatherings. Her self-esteem and

confidence were low. That day, I'll bet she was slipping in to sit in the back of the women's section, hoping no one would notice her.

Jesus did.

There are a couple of elements of the miracle worth noting.

First, the woman didn't approach Jesus. He invited her to come to him. Second, she had the faith to go to Jesus. After all, he was standing in the place of highest honor, the very middle of the congregation, in the middle of a really large crowd. She must have felt a strong call to put herself in such a highly visible, risky position. Finally, her response to Jesus' touch and healing is to immediately stand up and praise God!

The woman gave thanks and credit where thanks and credit were due, to God. She did so without regard or concern for where she was. After all, she was free from everything limiting her – body, mind and soul. She was restored in full view of the congregation, so she was once again a full member of the church and the community. She knew the full measure of God's grace and love. She experienced spiritual healing.

Let's shift our perspective again. The leaders of the congregation had a front row view of everything that transpired. They must have felt great that morning. After all, they had honor of having the greatest teacher and healer of their time leading them that morning. The place was packed. I'll bet they were counting on new members and increased income as a result.

But then something went wrong. Right in the middle of the lesson, Jesus stops teaching and calls out to someone in the back of the room. They're surprised to see a crippled woman come forward. Doesn't she know better? Her place is in the back, hidden. After all, she's crippled because of her sins or the sins of her parents. They're disturbed at this disruption to what was a smooth service.

That's when it gets worse! Jesus said something about freeing the woman and then he laid his hands on her. Scandalous! Doesn't Jesus understand the purity laws? He's just defiled himself. He's not related to this woman. That's inappropriate.

And the woman doesn't know her place. Clearly, she's healed, but only one of the leaders – a man, can stand in the place of highest honor,

look to heaven and praise God! She's overstepped her bounds. She's broken the rules of the congregation and the Sabbath. She's disrupted the service. They'll be the laughing stock of the whole town.

You could hear the buzz in the room, the congregation leaders grumbling to the people near them ... how dare they!

Then, to top things off, Jesus calls them out for their grumbling - in public. He tells them they're hypocrites. Yeah, we knew about the woman, but we haven't done anything to help her be part of the community for years. What Jesus did was amazing. We could have been thrilled with the miracle he did for the woman, joining her in praising God. We could have celebrated, even when it meant putting our ego, self-righteousness and rigid sense of reverence aside. That's what God's restoring grace calls us to do. Instead, they chose the path of shame and, rather than shaming Jesus or the woman, they ended up pushing themselves away from God. And they were ashamed.

Let's make one, final shift and consider the view of the crowd. The crowd and the congregation are the same. Jesus had thousands of people following him, so it's safe to believe that the building was full on that Sabbath day. It would be standing room only with lots of visitors from the community and out of town. Everyone would have been listening intently to hear Jesus teach. Most of all, they're hoping for Jesus to show them a sign. They wanted to see a miracle. They liked the way he stood up to the religious leaders. This was good stuff, bring it on. And they weren't disappointed. Of course, this wasn't their congregation. Those weren't their leaders. And they didn't really know the woman.

One, brief encounter with five different perspectives; that's what we have before us. Oh, yeah, you're the one with the fifth perspective. You, as the reader or the one hearing this message, also have a perspective on the scene. After all, you weren't there. You haven't been in the presence of Jesus when he was on the earth. You read the verses and then reflect on them. Your faith tradition informs you. Your experiences and the experiences of other people help you to grasp the practical difficulties and realities of what happened. You use reason to try to figure it out and to use the lesson to guide your decisions and your daily walk with Jesus. That's what it means to meditate on scripture.

Having done so together, I have a question for you:

Which role do you see yourself in?

We're all present in the story, one way or another. That's because this story is relived in our congregation, week in and week out. You can't remain the neutral, independent reader and be a believer.

Are you part of the crowd, the congregation who cheers Jesus on, waiting for a miracle, glad the woman is healed and the leaders are put to shame? If so, you should beware as that same crowd chanted, "Crucify him, crucify him" just a few months later.

Are you in the role of Jesus, the one who saw another person in need and acted out of compassion? If so, we're glad to have you as a part of us, calling us to serve others with passion and love. However, beware, for you are not God. Only God can do a miracle, truly pardon and heal. Rely on God and not on your own strength or ego. Don't let yourself be wounded when things don't go your way.

Are you in the role of the woman, one who feels invisible, marginalized and trapped - physically, mentally and spiritually? If so, I invite you to lift your eyes up to Jesus. He's calling to you. Jesus shows compassion, tenderness and kindness, even when everyone around you fails you or doesn't understand your situation. You're a valued and beloved child of God. Trust God. Jesus loves you. Embrace Jesus, be healed spiritually and live with joy, giving praise to God and teach us to do the same.

Or are you in the role of the church leaders? They were more concerned with rules than relationship. They grumbled and complained about disruptions and not getting their way, rather than seeing and celebrating what God was doing right in front of them, right in their very midst.

Sadly, I have to tell you that most of us, myself included, find ourselves in the role of the church leaders all too often. When we see our role as the keeper of the rules or we want things the way they used to be or we just want our way or we're holding too tightly to the Book of Discipline, we're grasping at human traditions and nostalgia. We don't know why parents can't keep kids quiet or why some disrupt us with

their voices. We're not seeing what God's Spirit is doing within our congregation and in the community outside the walls of this building. That's sad and hypocritical, but it's not too late.

Right before his encounter with the woman Jesus told a parable, *“A man owned a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none. He said to his gardener, ‘Look, I’ve come looking for fruit on this fig tree for the past three years, and I’ve never found any. Cut it down! Why should it continue depleting the soil’s nutrients?’ The gardener responded, ‘Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer. Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down’”* (vv6-9, CEB).

This parable is a warning and a call to wake up. God expects us to be fruitful. God has provided for us, sent someone to tend to us – physically, mentally and spiritually, and made sure we have all that we need to be nourished. God will move on to others if we're unable or unwilling to bear fruit. If we don't produce spiritual fruit or make disciples, then we're barren. The fact that nothing bad is happening is not a reason to take it easy, be comfortable and coast. It only means that the one whose will reigns supreme is waiting to see how we will respond.

So I invite you to get involved. Be intentional about your spiritual journey. Join a small group. Attend a Bible study. Go to an adult education class or training. Volunteer to help in a ministry and in the community. Read your Bible and pray. Pass your blessing on.

Most of all, I encourage you to lift your eyes up to Jesus, giving praise and honor to God. Be bold, compassionate and take action to help others who are suffering under the oppression and injustice of this world, marginalized and ignored. Be bold when you stand and give praise to God. Be intentional about making disciples and making your faith a joyful part of your life. Jesus makes lives better. That's the power of love and grace.

What better way is there to live than with hope and joy?

Let us pray ...

Lord, we give you thanks and praise for this lesson at this moment on this Sabbath. Thank you for showing us those who we have marginalized and for opening our eyes to others who are invisible in our homes, neighborhoods, church and community. Give us the courage to lift our eyes up, to be present and give honor and glory to you. Show us what it means to be restored and to restore as a community of faith, trusting you in every aspect of our lives. Be with all who need you on the good days and on the bad. We pray this is the name of the Great Physician, the one who heals our spirit, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Luke 13:10-17 (CEB)

Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. A woman was there who had been disabled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and couldn't stand up straight. When he saw her, Jesus called her to him and said, "Woman, you are set free from your sickness." He placed his hands on her and she straightened up at once and praised God.

The synagogue leader, incensed that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, responded, "There are six days during which work is permitted. Come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath day."

The Lord replied, "Hypocrites! Don't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from its stall and lead it out to get a drink? Then isn't it necessary that this woman, a daughter of Abraham, bound by Satan for eighteen long years, be set free from her bondage on the Sabbath day?" When he said these things, all his opponents were put to shame, but all those in the crowd rejoiced at all the extraordinary things he was doing.