

Jesus Shares Compassion

We are in the Christian calendar season called Lent, the journey to the cross and resurrection. Jesus has been gathering and teaching his disciples, modeling a lifestyle of grace for all who would be God's children. Our tendency is to think we should be able to repeat all that Jesus did, but we forget we are not Jesus and we cannot begin to know all our Savior knows. Keep in mind, as you study this passage that faith involves trusting God when life falls apart, when miracles don't happen, and when you do not have all the answers.



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Many years ago I was pastor of a wonderful church on the central coast of California. Sara, an African-American woman of strong faith and expressive joy, suffered from a rare blood condition that had no cure. We prayed fervently for her healing year after year. Sara called me from a Santa Barbara hospital in the middle of a week, explained that her Jewish doctor was standing beside her bed, and asked me to pray for her doctor and that God would bless him and his patient. Sara was not a candidate for surgery. A major blockage had formed in a carotid artery in her neck. About an hour later Sara called back shouting her joy that God had caused that "clump of blood to burst out of her neck" and the doctor could not explain it. Sara was on every prayer chain in our town of Lompoc. Within the week Sara and I were contacted by a popular Christian television program about appearing as their featured guests. I explained that Sara still had the blood condition and that we did not want to call attention to ourselves. The person on the phone reminded me that I was not willing to praise God for a miracle and that I was denying other Christians of a blessing! We did not become celebrities. Sara continues to serve and praise God in spite of her blood condition, reminding us that the greatest miracle is not a momentary event, but the lifetime of faithfulness that follows.

Matthew records two astounding miracles that reach far beyond the idea that God fixes our problems along the way, to the ultimate miracle of giving us a new life that outlasts any limitations and tragedies of this world. Jesus miraculously healed many people and we often wonder

why we cannot do the same. I know of many healings that have no rational explanation, but I also remember times it seemed heaven did not hear our prayers.

There is a second component in this subject of God's healing: the compassion of God exceeds the immediate moment and circumstance. Both women in today's text eventually faced death. God's ultimate healing comes when we face the final moments of this life and God welcomes us into his presence where there is no sickness or death. As believers we must pray for God's help and miracles, but we must also remember that in all circumstances God never stops loving us. Matthew records: "When (Jesus) saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36).

We have two intersecting stories of healing, marked by strong social conflicts. First there is the death of a synagogue leader's daughter. Jairus (according to Mark 5:22), a prominent member of the Jewish ruling class, kneels publicly before Jesus, pleading, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live" (9:18). Jesus and his disciples immediately head for Jairus' house, but are interrupted by, of all people, a woman who is a social outcast because she has suffered from a bleeding disorder for twelve years. This woman was forbidden by law to worship at synagogue or the Temple. Touching her or her clothing would render a person ritually unclean and excluded from public contact until certain offerings and rituals were performed. This poor woman, exiled and suffering, dared not even to face the young rabbi Jesus, but quietly moved behind him to touch the hem of his outer cloak, hoping to be healed. But Jesus is aware, turns to face her and says, "Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well" (9:22). Don't overlook the acceptance Jesus expresses as he calls her "daughter."

Jesus then proceeds to Jairus' house where a crowd of mourners has already gathered and the flute players are already playing funeral music. Jesus dismisses the crowd and announces the girl is not dead but sleeping. The onlookers laugh at Jesus' foolish words because they know death when they see it! But Jesus takes the girl's hand in his and she awakens! No wonder word of this miracle spread to other villages and houses of worship. The expectation of the Jewish leaders,

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like Jairus, was for a Messiah who would lead a successful revolt against the hated Romans and make Israel a great nation as it was in David's time. But this man of compassion who wins the hearts of people and cares about those who are on the edge of society does not fit what they believe or want. Yet Jesus raises the daughter of the rabbi!

Do I believe in miraculous healing? Yes – I have witnessed it! But I also know that God has an understanding that I will never have. Naturally we wonder why some prayers are answered while others are not. But we do not know the whole story and we should not attempt to declare what God will or will not do. I have also witnessed the miracles of modern medicine and worked with doctors who asked me to pray for them or a patient before surgery. I know doctors God has blessed with a gift of diagnosis that saved lives and others who aided in research that brought hope when it seemed there was none. Miracles come in many forms, but they all come from the same loving God.

As I read these miracle accounts I must examine my compassion for others. Jesus' compassion drew people to God, for he was more than a keeper of tradition and gifted teacher of the Law. Social status and labels meant nothing to our Savior. Love for God, if it is genuine and involves more than getting what we want for ourselves, should compel us to love others and help them.

There is something in every human heart that needs God's healing. We hear it in our current newscasts and see it everywhere in our society. There are outcasts all about us: foreigners, people with different complexions, people of different or no faith, political adversaries. Jesus saw beyond the differences to a broken heart and suffering. How would you see the two women Jesus healed in today's scriptures?

Consider that before we engage in a theology of healing or performing miracles we should study the compassion of Jesus that led him all the way to the cross and resurrection. There is the ultimate healing!

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.