

Good Power 2: The Power to Heal  
Mark 2:1-12  
Feb. 28, 2021  
North UMC

In the beginnings of the Methodist movement, John Wesley advised his traveling preachers to leave two books in the homes where they stayed: a copy of Thomas a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, a popular spiritual devotion, and a copy of Wesley's book *The Primitive Physick*.

*The Primitive Physick* was a book of medical treatments and advice of health which Wesley compiled from the medical textbooks of his day. It was the Methodist home remedy guide. It outpaced all of Wesley's other publications.

It was not uncommon for clergy to give medical advice in the 18th century. It was one of the duties the Church of England assigned to its clergy. Wesley and his colleagues were not a substitute for doctors, but one could say that Anglican priests were first responders.

Much of *The Primitive Physick* is preventative medicine and advice for a healthy lifestyle, such as number 4: "A due degree of exercise is indispensably necessary to health and long life. Walking is the best exercise for those who are able to bear it....the open air, when the weather is fair, contributes much to the benefit of exercise." Some remedies are reasonable and others are, well, you should use your own judgment:

6. St. Anthony's Fire (a rash caused by bacteria)—Take a glass of warm tar-water every hour, washing the part with the same. [He includes a recipe for tar-water, which is made with "Norway tar."]

9. An Asthma—cut an ounce of stick liquorice into slices; steep this in a quart of water four and twenty hours and use it when you are worse than usual, as a common drink. I have known this gave much ease. Or, half a pint of tar-water twice a day.

11. To Cure Baldness—Rub the part morning and evening with onions until it is red, and rub it afterwards with honey. Or, wash it with a decoction of boxwood. (Tried). Or, electrify it daily.

31. Children—To prevent the rickets, tenderness, and weakness, dip them in cold water every morning, at least till they are 9 months old....Let them go bare-footed and bare-headed till they are 3 or 4 years old at least.

35. Cure for Chapped Hands—Wash with soft soap mixed with red sand. (Tried). Or, wash them in sugar and water. (Tried).

50. Convulsions—Use the cold bath. Or, take a teaspoonful of powdered valerian root in a cup of water every evening. Or half a darchm of powdered misselto every six hours, drinking after it a draught of strong infusion thereof.

54. Cure for Corns—After paring them close, apply bruised ivy leaves daily, and in 15 days they will drop out. (Tried).

76. The Ear Ache—Rub the ear hard for a quarter of an hour. (Tried). Or, be electrified. Or, put in a roasted fig or onion, as hot as possible. (Tried). Or, blow the smoke of tobacco strongly into it.

228. Stone in the Kidneys—Use the cold bath. Or drink half a pint of water every morning. Or boil an ounce of common thistle-root, and four drachms of liquorice, in a pint of water. Drink it every morning.

277. Warts—Rub them daily with a radish or with the juice of marigold flowers: it will hardly fail.

Just as Wesley and his preachers were assisting in health care, the four friends were helping their friend find healing. The healing he received from Jesus was more than physical. What we see in this, and the other healing stories of Mark, is a holistic healing. Jesus's power to heal involved the different dimensions of our lives, and he used many means to share his healing power. His power to heal is just as real for us today, and the hope of wholeness is still found in Jesus Christ.

#### FAITH OF OTHERS

The story did not begin with the patient, but with his caregivers. Jesus is back in Capernaum teaching in someone's house. But his popularity had been growing. Word quickly got around, and soon the house was overflowing with folks standing in the front yard and peering in through the side windows. This man who could not walk was late because it was quite a task for his friends to get him onto the stretcher and carry him down the road. By the time they arrived, they were at the back of the crowd standing in the street.

But that did not stop his caregivers. They pushed their way through the crowd, carrying him on a mat. The doorway was too congested, so two climbed onto the roof and then the other two lifted their friend and then they got on the roof too and all four started dismantling the roof. As Jesus preached, debris fell on his head and shoulders, a spot of sunlight popped through, and then the hole got wide enough that the paralytic started being lowered on his mat into the room. The disruption was an act of faith.

But it was not the patient's faith. It was the faith of his friends that prompted the healing. In Mark's Gospel, in most cases when Jesus attributes a healing to faith, it is the faith of others—a mother, a father, four friends. Jesus's power to heal works through the faith of caregivers.

Today God uses the faith and dedication of others to bring the power of healing. God uses the training and skills of medical professionals as a channel of Jesus's healing touch. God uses the compassion and insights of counselors and therapists as a channel of Jesus's healing words. God's healing includes modern medicine and therapies. Faith is not in opposition to science, but rather the application of scientific knowledge can be an expression of faith.

In our contemporary and complex society, the carrying of others includes our systems of health care and health insurance. We carry others by creating effective policies and practices of public health. We carry others by reforming and maintaining access to affordable and holistic health care in our society. It is so easy for bureaucracies to malfunction, regardless of whether they are private companies or government agencies. It is a calling for those who work in the health-care industry to make those bureaucracies produce real results for real people. Especially since our society is marked by racism, it is imperative that we find ways to carry all people equally to good health.

Lest we think God only uses professionals, Jesus responded to the faith of this man's friends, ordinary folks like you and I who form the network of support for our loved ones. The power of our

presence and words is part of God's healing process. In the name of Jesus the Great Physician—a title Wesley was fond of using—we are called to carry others.

When Scott Kregel was a junior in high school he was a star basketball player until he was in a car accident. Scott was left in a coma for several days, and when he awoke, a long rehabilitation process lay ahead of him.

At first Scott was so discouraged that he refused to do the tedious therapy exercises. His coach, Tom Martin, had an idea. Martin told Scott that he would reserve a spot for him on the varsity team if he would cooperate with his therapists. In addition, the coach's wife, Cindy, spent hours every day working with Scott, and friends kept encouraging him.

Within two months Scott was back on the court, and in their final game he scored nine straight free throws to clinch a league victory in triple overtime.

God calls us to carry others to the healing power of Jesus.

## MENTAL HEALING

Jesus's power to heal included the soul and the mind as well as the body. Today's story takes a strange turn. When Jesus saw them lowering their friend through the ceiling, one would have expected him to address his paralysis. One would have thought that Jesus's first statement would have been, "Get up and walk." Instead, Jesus said, "Son, your sins are forgiven." It feels like a strange non sequitur.

Why start there? In part, because in those days many believed that all illness came from God as punishment for sin. And in part, Mark likes to heighten the story, so addressing the issue of sin delayed the big climax of the man getting up and walking out the door. But I also think there is another reason Jesus starts there.

As important as his physical well-being was to Jesus, so was his mind and his heart. Jesus is addressing the mental well-being and spiritual restoration that was every bit as needed for this man who had suffered for so long. The stories of Jesus's healing are also about mental health.

The word "forgive" in Greek can also be translated "release," "relinquish," "discharge," or "let go." In other passages, it refers to a divorce or the cancelation of debts (which is why some churches say the Lord's Prayer: "forgive us our debts."). Mental health is a process of releasing those thoughts and feelings that compel us, annoy us, and weigh us down.

For too long we in the religious community have had the wrong perspective on mental health and healing. We, like society, have accepted the false divide between mental and physical health. As we learn more about the brain, we are learning about the biological, chemical aspects of mental illness which were once assumed to be the fault of the patient or their parents.

And, by extension then, we have moralized and spiritualized and then stigmatized mental illness. We have rejected and punished people for behavior they that is a symptom of illness and a reaction to abusive and discriminatory policies. We have shamed people into thinking that their illness is a result of their lack of faith; that they should just be able to pray away their troubles.

In 1988, 12-year-old Ashley King died of a tumor. Her parents refused medical treatment for them because of their religious beliefs and withdrew her from her Phoenix school. By the time child

protection services gained temporary custody and took her to the hospital, the tumor had grown 41 inches on her right leg. The doctor gave her a 50-50 chance of surviving, but the parents refused treatment and had her transferred to a nursing home run by their religious tradition, where she died.

Remember this: in most of Jesus's healing stories in Mark, no faith was required or even mentioned. As with physical healing, God uses modern medicine and therapies to restore the mind. Let me be very clear: It is an act of faith for you to take your psychiatric medicines as part of a healthy lifestyle of good eating, good sleeping, good exercising, and good relationships.

#### SPIRITUAL HEALING

The stories of Jesus are also about spiritual health. The spiritual healing in this story is for those who do not seem to need any healing. The spiritual healing he offered was for the scribes. Their view of God was too limited, and it prevented them from accepting God's new life-restoring work in Jesus. Sometimes an illness or disorder forces us to change our ways of thinking about God.

Sometimes a disease or disability demands that we, the so-called "healthy ones," need to relinquish the ways we have seen and treated others. The healing that takes place may not be in changing the patient, but rather the people around them to make their environment accessible and accommodating. I am not just talking about ramps and doorway. The change also must be in teaching methods and employment practices.

#### PHYSICAL HEALING

The story ends with the healing of the man's body. After he pronounced his forgiveness, Jesus also addressed his bodily need. "Stand up, take your mat and go home," and the man got up, rolled up his mat, and walked through the door, down through the crowd, and out into the street. Yes, we believe in Jesus's power to heal bodies too. God who came in human flesh in Jesus Christ brings the fullness of salvation that includes our physical well-being. As I said, this healing can come through any means necessary, natural and supernatural, if God so chooses.

#### ETERNAL HEALING

But we also know that sometimes we do not see that physical healing. Even when the person dies, the healing power of Jesus is eternal. It is important to hear how Jesus refers to himself. He calls himself the "Son of Man," not "Son of God" or "Messiah" or even "Lord." The Son of Man was an ancient term from Hebrew scripture that had been used often to refer to God's future hope. When Jesus calls himself the "Son of Man" in this story it is a hint about the hope for the future. He will be the one who will restore and fulfill all things in eternity. The power of his eternal hope had broken into that home that day just like the friends tore the roof off.

For us, we may not see the full impact of Jesus's power to heal in this life. But we have the power of his hope that his healing keeps working in our lives beyond our last breath. We have the hope of the heavenly healing made possible by the resurrection of the Son of Man.

Until then, Jesus's power to heal works in our hearts and minds and makes the physical process of healing more effective.

That is what the writer Andre Debuse discovered. Late one night in 1986, Debuse was driving home when he came upon a woman and her brother whose car had died in the third lane of the interstate. Debuse pulled over to help them. While they were trying to flag down traffic, a car did not see them and hit their car in the rear end. The woman was uninjured, but her brother was killed. The car hit Debuse head on below the waist, throwing him over the parked car.

He spent eight months in the hospital undergoing six operations. He lost one leg and the other leg was paralyzed. He would never walk again. His marriage collapsed and he developed an anxiety disorder triggered whenever the sun started to go down or he was in an enclosed room, which reminded him of the hospital.

During this time he became very angry and hateful toward everyone, especially his thoughts of the driver who had hit him. Through the help of a friend, he started to pray about his anger. He had been raised in Catholic schools and taught to pray for our enemies. For several months he prayed for the woman who hit him.

One day as he was praying for her, he was consumed by a vision. He began to imagine what that night must have been like for her. He was able to imagine what she must have seen through her windshield. Then and only then was he able to forgive her and to release his bitterness and brokenness that was hurting his relationships and fueling his anxiety.

Jesus offers us the power to heal the whole person. He can renew and restore and repair our bodies and minds, our hearts and souls. He uses our skills and medicines, prayers and encouragement as the channels of his healing power. Let us be like the four friends and carry others to Jesus.