
May the Force Be With You!

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**A sermon the Rev. Canon George M. Maxwell, Jr.
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The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany - Year B**

*"And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons."
Mark 1:34*

Several years ago, I walked into the Cathedral to find a young husband looking for someone who would listen. His wife had just been diagnosed with breast cancer. Suddenly, nothing made sense to him anymore.

"She's my best friend," he said. "I can't even imagine my life without her in it."

Not long after that day, I went to Piedmont Hospital early in the morning to pray with them both before her surgery. The nurses began preparing her for surgery earlier than expected. The waiting room was empty when I arrived. So, I walked up the hill and found him at Chick-fil-A having breakfast.

We talked for awhile and, as I left, I gave him my oil stock and told him that he could anoint her for healing by making the sign of the cross on her forehead and repeating the Trinitarian formula - "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Later in the day, I read the following on her CaringBridge site:

"All is well. ... My husband is very happy. He got some oil from our priest and has been running up and down the halls anointing people and saying "May the Force be with you! I'm not sure that's exactly what our priest had in mind."

I have the most wonderful image of this impromptu ritual -- a big man, an even bigger smile, strangers turning into friends, joy literally jumping like electricity from one person to another. I can also picture her, lying in her bed, laughing until it hurts as she watches it all unfold.

It's an image of abandonment, a life totally committed to the joy of the moment.

I must admit, though, that sometimes the connection between faith and healing is easier for me to experience than to talk about. Talking about it makes me feel surprisingly uncomfortable. My mind starts to wander whenever I hear one of the stories about Jesus healing people in the Bible. That's when the questions pop up.

Did Jesus really cast demons out of one of the Gerasenes -- sending them into a large herd of swine, which then promptly rushed down a steep bank into a lake and were drown? (Lk 8:26-33)

Did a woman really have her hemorrhages healed just by touching the fringe of Jesus' cloak? (Mk 5:24-34)

Did Jesus really raise the local synagogue leader's daughter from the dead? (Mt 9:18-26)

It's not just the healing evangelists on television that send me running for my metaphors. It's something else - something that feels a bit more threatening.

I thought that I had answered all of these questions when I first heard the psychological interpretations of these stories. The explanations seemed so rational and comfortable.

The Gerasene man was a schizophrenic. Jesus knew how to calm him.

The woman's hemorrhages were caused by hysteria. Jesus' mere presence gave her the strength to pull herself out of it.

The young daughter of the synagogue leader had lapsed into a coma after some trauma. She only appeared to be dead. Jesus just knew how to bring her out of it.

These explanations may be rational and comfortable. But, they fail a basic test. They assume that the people in the story don't know what they're doing, but we do. And, they make Jesus look more like Sigmund Freud than the Son of God.

It occurs to me that the people in the stories about Jesus lived a lot closer to mental illness, disease, and death than most of us do. They may not have been able to talk knowingly about the difference between the id and the ego, but I suspect that they were intimately familiar with the difference between real physical problems and imagined ones.

And, the psychological interpretations don't explain stories like Rita's.

Rita Klaus grew up in Iowa. In 1955, when she was just fifteen years old, she entered a convent and became a Roman Catholic nun. The life of prayer and service suited her. Five years later, in 1960, she had an experience that would change her life.

As she was standing in the shower one cold winter morning, enjoying the warmth of the water, something happened. It got dark. She began to feel cold - as if the feeling was coming from inside of her. She kept moving her eyes, but she couldn't see through the darkness. Just as she realized that the lights had not gone out, she regained her sight. But, she knew she had a problem.

She was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

Her symptoms worsened over time. She began to have difficulty walking. She struggled with dizziness. She struggled with her balance. Ultimately, she was forced to leave the convent and move to Pennsylvania, where she became a teacher in a local public school.

In 1971, she met and married Ron Klaus and they had three children.

In 1978, however, her symptoms returned. This time she seemed to fall farther, faster. She quickly found herself in leg braces and a wheel chair.

And, the deterioration took its toll on her attitude toward life. She became bitter and angry, and felt nothing but despair.

She found herself isolated from her family and friends. Even God ceased to matter.

One day, a friend called and invited Rita to attend a healing service at the local church.

"I don't believe in healing," she said. "That stuff happened two thousand years ago. It's a bunch of fakes! I've watched them on TV, those televangelists shouting: "'You in the green dress! Come up here and be healed of your arthritis!' And the people who come up, they're all plants. Don't you know anything?"

She went to the service, though, mainly to prove to her friend that it wouldn't do any good.

When they arrived, the only seats left were in the front row. The ushers literally pulled her down the aisle. As the first hymn began, and everyone stood to sing, Rita's braces slipped on the floor and she began to slide under her seat, literally. The people around her grabbed her, lifted her up and held a hymnal in front of her face

so that she could sing.

She was humiliated, and it was about to get worse.

The priests came down the aisle in procession. One of them saw Rita, stopped the procession, wrapped his arms around her and began to pray. The other priests came over to her, laid their hands on her, and joined in the prayer.

Then, something unexpected happened.

"It flowed through me," she says, "filling every part of me ... It was like being hugged by God. I never felt so - loved - in all my life! It reminded me of when I'd almost drowned - the only comparison I could think of. And I found myself praying the first real prayer I had said in months, years: "'Dear God, I don't know what this is. I don't know what You're doing. But, whatever it is, it's okay."

Rita felt transformed. Her symptoms remained. She still needed the braces. She still needed the wheel chair. But, she felt different. All of the anger, all of the bitterness, and all of the despair - they evaporated. In their place, Rita felt a sense of love and peace. She felt a sense of gratitude. She had been spiritually healed, even though she had not been physically healed. And, it made all the difference.

Rita's body continued to decline over the next several years. Yet, she continued to feel a sense of purpose, a sense of peace. She prayed. She didn't pray to be cured, interestingly; she prayed for the grace that she needed to sustain herself.

One night, as she was saying her prayers, she saw an image of Christ. He told her that she had not given him everything. "Lord," she replied, "I have. I have nothing left to give You. I completely trust in You." He said to her, "Then give me your sins." She did and felt a new freedom, deeper than anything she had ever felt before.

After that, Rita devoted herself to her prayer life. She committed herself even more fully to a number of different spiritual disciplines and practices. She even began to hope that she might be cured, that she might be physically healed.

In 1986, again at night, as she was praying the rosary, she heard a voice: "Why don't you ask?" The radio was turned off. So was the television. No one else was in the house. But, the voice was real.

She thought for a moment. Then, she made a decision. She would ask. "Mary, my mother, Queen of Peace," she said, "please ask your Son to heal me in any way that I need to be healed. I know your Son has said that if you have faith, and say to the mountains, "'Move,' that they will move. I believe. Please help my unbelief."

The next day, during a break in her routine, something strange happened. Rita felt her body warm, first in her feet, and then her legs, and then across the rest of her body. She began to itch, especially in her legs. Her toes began to move. She could feel her fingernails.

When she went home, she took off her braces. She looked down at her leg, which had been shortened and twisted by her illness, and realized that it had returned to normal. The kneecap had moved back to where it was supposed to be. She felt a sudden urge to move. So, she ran. She ran out of the house and into the yard. She ran from one side of the yard to the other.

She had been cured. She had received the physical healing that she had hoped for.

So, what am I to make of Rita's story?

She is not the only person to experience a spontaneous remission of multiple sclerosis. Apparently, it happens a lot. There is something striking, though, about the way that she was healed.

Maybe it was because she had been trained as a nun. Or, maybe it was because she had suffered so much physical pain and embarrassment. But, whatever it was, her healing seems grounded in her trust in God and her willingness to allow her faith to change her.

Listen again to her prayer. "Mary, my mother, Queen of Peace," she said, "please ask your Son to heal me in any way that I need to be healed. I know your Son has said that if you have faith, and say to the mountains,

"'Move,' that they will move. I believe. Please help my unbelief."

Rita knows that the absence of pain does not a life make.

Rita is not asking for her symptoms to go away - though that's what she wants - she is asking to be healed. She knows that Christian healing begins in the soul and works its way out into the body. And, she knows that, once it starts, she can't control where it goes.

She later said that if she had to choose between the spiritual healing and the physical healing, then she would choose the spiritual healing. It was her spiritual healing that allowed her to get up each day and do what she could with the gifts that she had been given. It was her spiritual healing that allowed her to find a way to be grateful for the life that she was living.

Perhaps this is the part that makes me so uncomfortable.

It's not the embarrassment of the television evangelists. It's a fear of change. I don't really want to be transformed by something that I can't control. I don't really want to abandon myself to anything.

Calm my mind. Give me the strength to heal myself. Bring me out of the coma. That's all fine. I'll even pay a reasonable hourly rate for it.

But, don't touch my soul. Don't ask me to give up the control that I think I have over my life.

It's ironic, when you think about it. What I really want is a lot less than what God is offering.

Maybe this is how Jesus healed all of those people. Maybe he was able to touch their souls and they felt transformed.

Maybe this is why he tells the paralytic that his sins are forgiven, before he tells him to stand up, pick up his mat and go home. (Mk 2:3-12)

Maybe this is why he tells people that their faith has made them well.

It's not as comfortable an explanation as the psychological interpretations. But, interestingly, it's more rational. It's a simpler explanation that explains more of the facts.

Healing starts with our abandonment to God, a faith-filled trust that leads inevitably to transformation. Sometimes that transformation generates physical healing and sometimes it doesn't.

But, healing is not something separate from the other practices of the church. It takes its place alongside of forgiveness, reconciliation, and all of the other gifts of God. It works with them to restore us to ourselves, to our community, and to bring us into the Kingdom of God.

All I have to do, it seems, is abandon myself to God.

I suspect I already know how that will feel. I'll notice a strange warm feeling, maybe some movement in my toes. I might itch a little, as I begin to remember parts of myself I have long since forgotten about.

And then, I'll probably want to run, maybe up and down the hallway of a hospital, anointing everyone I meet and shouting, "May the Force Be With You!"

Amen.

You may be interested to know:

- The couple in the story at Piedmont Hospital are both doing well. I thank them for allowing me to share this part of their lives, and to tell you about it.
- Although my characterization of the Christian practice of healing reflects the traditional Anglican understanding, I have taken the structure of the argument from a Presbyterian pastor, The Rev. Dr. N. Graham Standish. He offers an insightful description of the practice of Christian healing in Chapter 5, "Walking the Healing Path," of his book titled

Discovering the Narrow Path: A Guide to Spiritual Balance (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). In particular, I have relied on Standish for the set up and critique of the psychological explanations of the healing stories (pp. 98-99), the story of Rita Klaus (pp. 100-104), and the insight that most of us don't really want "spiritual healing because it transforms us to the core" (p. 107).

- Rita Klaus has published a book that tells her story more completely. It is titled *Rita's Story* (Orleans, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 1993).