

“Bringing Our Pain to Jesus”

Mary Kay Collins | August 6, 2006 | Mark 9:14–29

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” Someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.” He answered them, “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.” And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” Jesus said to him, “If you are able! — All things can be done for the one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!” When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!” After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.” But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” He said to them, “This kind can come out only through prayer.”

This morning we continue looking at this story of healing and faith. Last week we focused on the father’s powerful statement to Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief.” Today I want us to consider the healing itself. This is just one of many examples in the Bible of Jesus performing miracles of healing and exorcism. Let us begin by simply living in this story, in this amazing scene between a desperate and loving father and Jesus.

The father says that his son has been having these convulsions since childhood. We can guess that the boy is a teenager. An evil spirit has possessed the boy, making him unable to speak, and worse, periodically seizing him and causing him to be cast into a fire or into a body of water. Imagine the constant anxiety of the father always on the lookout just trying to keep his son from being killed by this demon. With our modern knowledge of medicine we can guess that the boy had a condition such as epilepsy, or brain seizures. Yet in many cases even our modern medicine cannot tell us the reason for some brain seizures, so we should be careful about dismissing the idea of evil spirits out of hand. Furthermore, if we broaden our understanding of what might be meant by an evil spirit or demon, I think we can all readily attest to their reality. Our modern demons include things like addictions, compulsions, and obsessions.

As this story begins, there is a crowd of the disciples and scribes arguing about something—general disorder. Jesus enters the scene and the text tells us that the crowd was overcome with awe, and that they all run to greet him. Jesus has seen them arguing and asks what was going on. A voice from the crowd speaks up and says, Teacher, I brought you my son; he is possessed by a demon but your disciples could not cast it out. Jesus responds by saying: “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.”

The end of the story gives us a hint as to what Jesus means when he castigates his disciples like this. At the end the disciples ask Jesus why they weren’t able to cast out the demon, and Jesus says that “this kind can come out only through prayer.” What exactly Jesus means here, has been considered by many theologians, perhaps the disciples had gotten a little full of themselves and had lost sight of where their power to heal came from. Perhaps they forgot to call upon Jesus for help and thought they could do it themselves? In any event, Jesus says, “Bring him to me.”

Bring him to me. Such words of comfort. They bring the boy to Jesus and the demon is cast out. The boy and his father, who have suffered for so many years, are relieved. This is who Jesus is, and what Jesus promises to do for us. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus says: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” [11:28]. This father and his son are certainly weary and carry a heavy burden. Jesus gives them rest.

The stories of Jesus’ healings are important because they tangibly show both Jesus’ power and his mercy. This is such good news, because we all are weary, we all carry heavy burdens, we all have our own personal demons, we all have pain that we can bring to Jesus. So whatever else we might say about healing, let’s just pause to take that in—that promise, that hope.

It’s important to try to breathe that in, because sometimes it’s hard. The boy in this story is healed, but often we are not healed, as we would want. Sometimes the cancer does not go into remission. Sometimes the child is born with a debilitating condition that will never get better. So where is Jesus then? What happens when we bring our pain to Jesus for healing and it seems like nothing happens?

Jesus seems pretty clear about the power of prayer. Listen to these three passages:

Matthew 7.7-8: “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and

everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”

Matthew 21.22: “Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.”

Mark 11.24: “So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

And yet sometimes prayers are not answered in the way that we might wish. In fact, we can be sure that some prayers will never be answered in the way we might wish. For example, today we can reasonably hope to spend eighty years or so on this earth before we die. In different times at different places that life expectancy has been much less. If I pray that I might live to be 200 years old, and I enlist all of you to pray this prayer for me as well, can I expect to live to be 200? Of course not. Does this mean that Jesus’ promises are false? Of course not. That seems easy.

But it’s a lot harder when we all pray that an 8-year-old with Leukemia might make it to age 10. It’s hard when that prayer isn’t answered. There’s nothing that I or anyone else can tell you that will make this or the many other tragedies people experience easy or comprehensible. Matter of fact these such tragedies are very painful!

And yet God never promises a life free from pain. God’s very own son, Jesus, he didn’t have a life free from pain—quite the opposite. Jesus suffered unimaginably, and prayed before his crucifixion that his burden might be lifted. We know that it wasn’t. If Jesus can scream out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Can’t we do the same, and sometimes we must!

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest, writes that

we need a God who knows about pain. Anyone who has suffered through even one night of deep hurt knows what it is to beg for relief. Sometimes the prayer is answered and sometimes it is not, but those who have been there will often say that the strange, sweet presence of Christ in their suffering becomes dearer to them than the hope of recovery. [*God in Pain*, 12]

While God doesn’t promise us a life free from pain, I believe that God does promise true healing and always makes good on that promise.

This morning we come together for communion, and as we gather around this table to partake in this meal, we will all have the opportunity to experience that promise of true healing. God’s healing, not healing that the world might promise, God’s healing.

God's healing, true healing means to become whole. Jesus says in Matthew 5.48 that we are to "Be perfect, therefore, as [our] heavenly Father is perfect." The Greek word translated as "perfect" is *teleios* [tel'-i-os], which means "brought to its end, finished" or "wanting nothing necessary to completeness." In other words, whole. Become whole as your heavenly father is whole—that is the healing we are all promised through Jesus Christ.

And no matter how healthy we are, how relatively free from tragedy our lives have been, we are all equally in need of the wholeness that comes about through knowing Jesus Christ.

Jesus came to make us whole, to bring us into relationship with God. This is why the resurrection happened. Resurrection is not just something that promises us life after death. Resurrection is about Life abundant—wholeness—now. It is right here for you and me as we gather around this table. We can bring our pain, our disease, our afflictions, our demons, we are to bring all that we are to Jesus, right now and Jesus will make us whole. That is true no matter what happens on the physical level.

We are all invited to this table today, this table, where Christ invites us to a meal with him, to be with him, receive him, receive his mercy, his love, his grace, his healing! May we all bring our pain to Jesus this day and be open to the healing presence that he provides. Amen.