

## YOUR FAITH HAS MADE YOU WELL

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*Then Jesus said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."  
(Luke 17:19)*

Your faith has made you well. This is one of those statements that can do as much harm as good, depending on its use. For a *very* brief time, there was a nurse working at my college's health center who probably had very noble intentions of treating students more holistically, but her advice was not always received with that intent. When a young woman on my floor who lived with a whole host of health problems, including fibromyalgia and migraine headaches, made an appointment at the health center to deal with acute issues until she could see her physician at home, the nurse asked questions about her relationship with God and sent her away with the recommendation that she "pray more." That did not go over well.

Yes, there have been many sick or injured people who believed, and prayed, and were lifted in prayer, and became well. But for every one of those stories, there are also stories of those who believe, and pray, and are lifted in prayer, and are still sick, or hurting, or broken. Some of the most faithful people die from disease or accidents, and plenty of people with no faith and perhaps no one praying for them survive. Faith and prayer are not magic formulas that invalidate cause and effect.

I'm not here to say that miraculous healings don't happen. I'm not here to tell you not to hope or pray for a miracle—though I would note that the miracles we're given are often different than the ones for which we had planned.

This story from Luke, though, is not about faith healing—and it certainly doesn't imply that illness or weakness are the result of a lack of faith. In fact, In Jesus' story, the physical healing is almost an afterthought. All ten of the leprosy men were physically healed of their leprosy, with little fanfare—it simply happens as they are traveling the road to the priest, trusting Jesus' words that they are healed. They are all cured of their leprosy, but only the one who returned to give thanks is told, "Your faith has made you well."

We never hear what becomes of the other nine. It can be tempting to write them off as thankless ingrates, but perhaps we should cut them some slack. They were, after all, following Jesus' instructions. "Go and show yourselves to the priests," he told them, and so they did, being made clean on the way.

Leprosy, in the time of Jesus, was a blanket term for a number of skin diseases thought to be highly contagious. Those with leprosy were considered unclean and forced to live in quarantine, separated from their communities and loved ones. It was the priest who could make the determination as to whether someone was healed, and ritually restore him or her to cleanness

and community. What Jesus was saying, then, was “Go and return to your communities, to your parents and wives and children. Be freed from your isolation and exclusion.” Is it any wonder, then, that they followed instructions and went as quickly as possible?

In fact, I wonder how many of us, imagining ourselves into the story, might find a comfortable fit with one of these nine. We call out to Jesus for help, we obey his command, our cry is answered, and we go on our way.

These nine are obedient and they are rewarded—do they even suspect there is something they might be missing? What is it that the tenth man understands while his companions do not? Why does he go beyond obedience to respond in the way that is most right and fitting?

It is only after the healing (and thanks-giving) are we told that the tenth man is a Samaritan—an outsider, a foreigner. Samaritans worshipped the same God as the Judeans, but theirs was not mainstream Judaism, and they had variations in practice and theology. Quite a bit of antipathy existed between the groups, as is apparent in the Gospel tellings of Jesus’ interactions with them.

While the ten men were afflicted with leprosy, that was their defining characteristic. It exiled them from their communities of origin and forced them to rely on one another. When they were healed, their differences and old ways of relating to one another suddenly became more apparent, including the Samaritan’s outsider status. The Samaritan was a foreigner, a social and religious outcast—and yet he was the one who returned to Jesus to express gratitude for his healing, for his salvation.

For healing and salvation are inextricably tied in this story—and, indeed, in the whole biblical conception of healing. The word translated into our English translation as “heal” is from the Greek verb *sózó*, the primary meaning of which is “I save.” It can be used to talk of healing, yes, but it always carries this meaning of salvation, of preservation, of rescue.

Both healing and salvation describe God’s work of making people well and whole, and reconciled with God and community. Jesus’ healing of the men with leprosy and, particularly, of the Samaritan man, was not simply a medical cure from a severe disease. It was a restoration to community and social status. More than that, even, it was—for the Samaritan man, at least—a complete redirection of life and faith.

While the nine men were satisfied with their physical healing, and perhaps even moved in their faith, it is the Samaritan who really grasps what is going on. It is the outsider who bucks obedience in an act of gratitude for transformational bringing to wholeness. The nine obey the Lord their God, but the Samaritan really acts out of love for God.

In thinking about healing and wellness as a whole-person transformation, it becomes a bit easier to sit with Jesus’ words. “Your faith has made you well.” Healing is not limited to physical recovery. In fact, sometimes healing does not come in the form of physical recovery at all.

This was a common theme my first summer in seminary, which I spent as a chaplain intern at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. My fellow interns and I spent a great deal of time talking with patients about God and faith, and we spent a lot of time in prayer. Some of our patients got well and went home. Some were facing chronic illnesses. Some faced uncertain futures and difficult treatments. And some died in the hospital. It was always good to hear of a patient being discharged with a clean bill of health, but we learned fairly quickly that good spiritual health and good physical health were not always related, and that true healing and physical death are not always mutually exclusive.

God wants us to be well. God's great wish for us is to for us to be healed and whole, to live healthy lives abundant beyond our imaginings, to become more and more fully ourselves and more and more fully in God, living out God's will and living into God's Kingdom. This wellness encompasses our entire selves, our souls *and* bodies. We can be the picture of health and yet not be well and whole. We can also work towards wholeness even when full physical or psychological healing may not be a reality.

This journeying towards wholeness naturally streams into gratitude. The Samaritan man demonstrates a faith made complete in his thankfulness, thankfulness that flows from a healing and saving relationship with Jesus. In this Gospel passage, the Samaritan man stands before God, and at this moment truly understands who his healer and savior is, and who he himself is, and his praise and thanksgiving is an outpouring of this understanding.

I hope you'll forgive me for indulging in *more* word study, but it's a background that helps us understand how gratitude is already worked into our Christian lives. The Samaritan "praised God with a loud voice" and then fell on his face before Jesus "and thanked him." Believe it or not, these are acts that have made their way into our church services!

The word for praising, glorifying, and honoring God is *doxazó*, where we get our "doxology." A doxology is not by necessity a part of the service, but it *is* part of our services here at Grace. The doxology is the name for the hymn we use as the offering is presented. We sing "praise God from whom all blessings flow" as we glorify God with our voices and our resources.

And then the word for giving thanks, *eucharisteó*, is what we act out whenever we gather to celebrate the Eucharist. Right in the words of the Eucharistic prayer we hear: *Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. It is right to give our thanks and praise. It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.*

But these words are not meant just to be said on a Sunday morning. They are meant to cover all the big and small moments of daily living. Gratitude is wrapped up in our faith and how we operate as Christians.

And gratitude, like love, is not simply a feeling or an emotion; it is also a way of acting, a way of living. Jesus asks us to love our enemies, but it is not always possible to *feel* loving towards them. In fact, it's not always easy to *feel* loving towards the people we love most.

However, we can *act* loving towards them. We can accept that our enemies are children of God, and act accordingly. We may even be able to approach some sort of empathy.

It is the same with gratitude. There are many situations in life in which it would be very difficult to *feel* grateful. But we can still *be* grateful if we think of gratitude not as a feeling of thankfulness for life's blessings, but rather as a way of living in recognition of God's grace always preceding and following us. This is a life of trusting that choosing faith does not mean choosing a life of ease, but rather choosing a life of calling on God in the good times and the bad. Gratitude means accepting God's gift of abundant life, along with the pain and risk of living that life.

Paul was no stranger to the pain and risk of living a life of faith. He dealt with beatings, imprisonments, near-drownings, ill health, and a host of early Christians who wanted him to settle their arguments. Knowing this, his sometimes longsuffering and woe-is-me tone becomes a bit more understandable, and his perseverance incredible. In today's reading from 2 Timothy, we read about Paul's hope: If we have died with Christ in baptism and belief, we also live with him in blessed and abundant life.

I'm not sure what to make of the line "If we deny him, he will deny us." Apostasy was a problem in Paul's time, but we see right in the Bible's account of Peter that denying Jesus is met with forgiveness and reconciliation on his part, not denial. And the very next line tells us, "if we are faithless, he remains faithful," because it would go against God's very nature not to be faithful.

This is Jesus' promise to us: salvation. Healing. Wholeness, abundant life, and a God who will never give up on us.

If we really understand what this promise means for us, if we really are really awake to the implications of it, merely meekly obeying and going on our way will not be enough. Our awe and love will be that of the praise and gratitude we see in the Samaritan man.

We are broken, but we are being made whole.

We are lost, but we are being rescued.

Our failures are met with salvation.

Our falls are met with grace.

Our faith has made us well. Thanks be to God.