

Reflection: 20/11/11

I was at a mission conference in 2008. There, I heard an interesting story about healers. The narrator said 'In the West, when it comes to healing, the person who is sick has to take all the risks, but in Africa, when it comes to healing it is the healer who goes to 'the other side' to find out what has caused the illness. It is the healer who takes the risks.

This set me to thinking about the process of healing and its relationship to risk taking. To think about healing is particularly relevant this week, because at the Eucharist on Wednesday, we read from John's Gospel (Chapter 4) where Jesus says, in relation to a healing, in an exasperated tone, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.' Later on in Chapter 6 he says of the people who had been fed, and then followed him, 'You have not followed me because you saw the 'sign' but because you had your bellies full!'

The people in these stories whom Jesus is criticizing are ones who want to be in control. They say 'Show us a sign and we will believe!' In effect, they are un-believing, and want to command the 'healer' to do what *they* want, thus leaving them untouched. For my money, healing is not about being untouched, but about being touched.

I think about the story of the woman with the haemorrhage. She says 'If only I can *touch* his garment I will be healed'. And in Matthew's Gospel (Chapter 9:18 - 26) the woman touches Jesus, and he turns around and says to her 'Courage daughter, your faith has restored you to health'. But in the earlier version we have in Mark (Ch. 5) and which Luke preserves too, the woman can't remain

anonymous. She is ashamed of her perpetual unclean state, and she reaches out to Jesus, and takes a huge risk: what will he say to be touched by an unclean woman? But she does. What is more frightening, is that Jesus does not let her off the hook! He says 'Who touched me?' He turns around and in relationship 'touches' the woman back! *Then* she is healed.

This has great power for me, because it is the kind of healing that I can relate to. Many is the time when there has been a rift between me and someone I love, or when I have done something that I am ashamed of. The healing of the relationship comes when I take the risk to bring into the circle that which remains hidden and so has festering power.

It is also true for ordinary relationships. As we get to know each other here in Montreux, each step closer in love involves a risk. It involves stepping over a hurdle. The hurdle might be one of a simple disclosure of a piece of information, or it might be risking saying something a bit more personal, or it might be the risking of a conflict. But each step toward another person involves risk.

The story of the paralysed man whose four friends brought him to Jesus is also important to me here. Jesus says to the paralysed man 'your sins are forgiven.' So why does he do this? I think it is because Jesus knows the connection between 'movement' and 'sin'. It is the 'frozen' (paralysed) person, the one who can not take the risk of contact who is sinning by remaining hidden and dis-engaged. Like the woman who loved much because she was forgiven much, so the paralysed man can now 'move' because his fear of movement has been forgiven.

It is the engagement of his friends, and the engagement with Jesus that 'loosens his bones'.

When I was regularly taking part in human relations groups, there was a saying: 'Behold the turtle, who only makes progress when he sticks his neck out!' That is what I mean.

There is a hymn too which comes to me in this context. It goes:

*It passeth telling,
that dear love of thine,
my Saviour Jesus,
yet these lips of mine
would fain proclaim to sinners far
[and near
a love that can remove all guilty fear
and love beget.*

This is what I think is going on when people are healed. Regardless of what happens to them physically (which might or might not change) John's Gospel always points us away from that 'miracle' to the deeper 'sign' which involves an experience of being loved, and an engagement with Jesus. Do you remember when Peter meets with Jesus on the shores of lake Tiberius after the resurrection? Three times Jesus asks Peter 'Do you love me'. These three times match the three times that Peter denied Jesus. This conversation forces Peter to confront his 'guilty fear' and say 'You know everything! You know that I love you!' It is Jesus' love that does this. This is for John, and for me, just as much a healing miracle as the healing of lepers or of blind people. It is the kind of miracle that happens every day, and the kind of miracle that requires me to open up to the truth of myself before God, which is the life of faith.

This way of approaching healing helps me to make sense of the experience of people who have chronic

illness. Sometimes a chronic illness is an expression of an internal paralysis that relationships can heal. Sometimes a chronic illness is just that: something painful and physical that will not go away. In that case, what is important is that I not close off from the 'un-fixability' of the illness, but stay with the incompleteness of disease in love. That too requires risk.

Now it is possible that all this risk taking might go wrong! What if the person with whom I take a risk can't see the risk, and they reject me instead of responding in love? This is the fear that stops people from doing anything in the first place. It means that relationships remain broken. Does that matter? Sometimes it does when the relationships are close ones. Sometimes it doesn't when relationships are of the order of acquaintances rather than of friendships.

Being married is teaching me that more often than not, the grace of God steps into the space that is opened up when I or Robyn open up to risk taking with one another. It is those moments that deepen our relationship. That is what makes marriage a sacrament.

Your 'Companion on The Way' and Priest

Paul Dalzell

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