

Tikkun Olam: Faith As A Verb

^{NRS} Luk 4:38 After leaving the synagogue he entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked him about her.³⁹ Then he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. Immediately she got up and began to serve them.

⁴⁰ As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them.⁴¹ Demons also came out of many, shouting, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Messiah.

⁴² At daybreak he departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them.⁴³ But he said to them, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose."⁴⁴ So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea.

What if faith were a verb? What if faith were a verb?

For English speakers like ourselves, faith is a noun. Faith is a thing. We say, "That person sure *has* faith." Or, "She *has* a strong faith." Like any other possession, faith can be lost. One of my favorite books is Graham Greene's The Power and the Glory in which the main character, called "the whiskey priest", is a priest who had seen so much suffering and difficulty he almost completely *loses* his faith in God substituting brandy instead. And, if the great theologian Billy Joel is any authority we can even *keep* the faith- especially in "matador boots and a tight pair of chinos" as his song goes. So we can *have* faith, we can *lose* faith, we can *keep* faith- faith for us is a thing, a noun- there's no getting around it.

But what if faith were a verb- an action? What if we "faithed"- "I faithed" yesterday, "I faith" today, and "I will faith" tomorrow? (And if 'faithed' doesn't sound strange to your ears, my spell check freaked out- hoping against hope that I really meant 'faced' instead of 'faithed'.) What if faith were a verb?

I raise the question not merely out of supposition, but because of Scripture itself. See, in Greek the word for faith, *pistis*, isn't simply a noun- it is also a verb, *pisteuo*. You can think of the word *pisteuo* roughly translated as 'I faith'; '*episteusa*- I faithed'; and *pisteuso*- 'I will faith'. Incidentally this isn't just academic- *all* of these forms are found in the New Testament. And it's the same in Latin, the language English borrows the word 'faith' from in the first place. If you ever wondered why we name dogs Fido, it's because *fido* means "I faith- I trust" in Latin. In the original languages faith isn't reduced to merely functioning as a thing- it was also an action- something people did. In the original languages faith wasn't just a noun- it was also a verb. Because of this language problem, few of us ever think of our faith primarily as more of a process, or a way of life, or an art- something we have to constantly be practicing and working at. No, most of us tend to think of faith just as a something we have or get rather than something we do. And when we miss this- we really are missing out on the full Biblical sense of what faith really is.

Now, this morning our text provides a great opportunity to begin to reshape the way we see and think. This morning our text provides a great opportunity to see faith as a verb- to see faith enacted in other words. We see it in three stories about Jesus healing.

It's no accident that when Jesus acts out faith, we mainly see him healing. While Jesus teaches some, and preaches from time to time- what we see him do again and again and again in the stories we tell about him is heal. Even his name Yeshua, means to save, or more literally in Greek- to heal. For Jesus to faith, to act out faith, most of the time means to heal.

In this he isn't doing anything new- rather he's just living out his tradition. Jewish theologians tell us if we want to begin to understand God, then we have to know a single Hebrew phrase- the phrase is *tikkun olam*, literally, "the healing of the world." If you go out and search on Google this afternoon for *tikkun olam*, you will find countless synagogues and groups named after this phrase, which only begins to demonstrate how important this notion of healing is in the eyes of our elder brothers and sisters in the synagogue. *Tikkun olam* is both the work of God, healing and restoring creation, as well as the work of human beings, participating with God in mending lives ripped apart. One Jewish theologian actually believes that human beings were actually created in order to help God clean up the world which had become kind of a mess. That's the reason we're here- he believes- to be healers, to be partners in *tikkun olam*.

(Of course there's another story of creation I just heard recently, if you'll bear with me. Garrison Keillor tells us that originally God actually created woman, Eve, first, not Adam. And originally, I know it sounds a little strange, but God created her with three breasts- not two. But it wasn't working out. The one in the middle was getting in the way- and so God zapped it off. And Eve then went to him, holding the useless appendage in her hand saying, "Well, what am I supposed to do with this?" And that's when, according to Keillor, that's when God created man.)

But to tie all this back in- if we want to have the fullest understanding of faith, not just to have faith but what it is to faith- we look to Christ and his embodiment of *tikkun olam*. Christ shows us that faith as a verb means participating in this healing of the world.

This morning he shows us this in three ways. First, we see Christ heal in a very private and personal setting- he heals in a home. Second, we follow Christ out into the evening where he heals in a more public and extended way healing the whole city gathered at his door. And then, and I think this is critical- we find Christ taking off into a deserted place to pray as he gets ready to move on- literally healing himself.

So the first miracle. It's after synagogue, after church, and Jesus and the gang heads over to Simon's house. I wonder if they had tradition like some families have- some families head to lunch afterwards. Some families go picnic together. One that was new to me was in Melissa's family- when we visited her grandparents in Mississippi I learned that it was customary to have Sherry after church. And even if it was to a way to show they weren't Baptists, at the time I certainly thought guzzling a nice Amontillado beat a picnic any day of the week. And it makes me wonder, it makes me wonder about Jesus and his crew- what kind of tradition they had, because whatever kind of tradition they had- everything is put on hold when they get home. Simon's mother-in-law, the senior woman of the house, lies stricken with fever in bed. And understand, a little fever means so little today- the emergency room is close if anything gets out of hand. Well there is no emergency room back then- and the bloodletting and leech system of the 18th and 19th centuries- that would have been futuristic medicine on a grand scale compared to the medical science of the day. Simon's mother-in-law was in trouble.

And Jesus simple as you please, enters the room, lifts her hand, and raises her up- restored.

And if you're worried about the tag line- where she gets up and serves them. This really isn't an example of Archie Bunker/Ted Bundy chauvanism. We're so quick to jump up and exclaim- they couldn't even let the poor woman catch her breath- they made her serve them after being so sick. Remember, this is the same Jesus when confronted with Mary and Martha, and Martha was so busy serving and complained about Mary just sitting there learning- Jesus defended Mary saying she had the better part. No, miracle stories are a genre in the ancient world, and in every miracle there is often a tag line which demonstrates that the healing is effective- in this case when Luke writes that she jumps up, now able to pour the Sherry- the healing is effective.

Now, what I love about this example of Jesus' healing nature, his participation in tikkun olam, the healing of the world- is that it starts so small, it starts in a private home. When I hear the words 'heal the world', if I were to hear someone tell me that faith is the active participation in healing of the world- my first response would be to be grateful that I was raised Presbyterian and that I was probably sitting near the back and probably on the edge so I could take off quick. Healing the world sounds so grandiose- so puffed up- so ambitious. I can barely keep myself whole and some days don't- and here faith is being responsible for the world?

That's what I love about this story- the world starts with one person, doesn't it? The world is made up of a bunch of individuals- and tikkun olam, the healing of the world, starts with one. Jesus isn't so important, so bent on healing the world, that he overlooks a little mother-in-law with a fever. In fact he starts with her.

To faith is to participate in the healing of the world and it starts with our little corner of it. It starts at home. It starts with family. Where does your family need healing? Where do you need wholeness? How can you be a part of that?

The second scene takes us into the evening after a long day. Mind you Jesus has already lead service and healed Simon's mother-in-law, but he's not finished. His work of acting in faith, of faithing, continues. Having heard about him the entire city brings their sick and their diseased to Jesus and he starts shop. It reminds me a little of that scene in Monty Python's Search for the Holy Grail when the guy is going through the streets ringing the bell shouting- Bring Out Your Dead! And you know there's that woman smacking the cat on the wall like she's getting dust out a rug. Only here, Jesus is staying right where he is and the dead, near dead, and anywhere in-between are making their way out to him.

Now this is tikkun olam, the healing of the world, on a larger, more public scale. If Jesus starts at home- he isn't content to let it stay there. His call takes him to the sick of the entire city- and in his death and resurrection- we believe his healing encompasses all of creation. And there are some of you sitting here this morning who hunger for this aspect of acting faith- being an agent of healing in the personal and private scene is fine, but you hunger to be an agent of healing on a larger scene. You see needs beyond your home, maybe beyond Tualatin, or Portland, or Oregon, or America. Your faith is leading you outside of what you know and are comfortable with- to larger concerns regarding peace, or social justice, or the environment.

One of my favorite stories about this comes from a friend of mine, Tom Heger, a pastor I knew back in Austin, and he tells the story of a little old lady who picketed the pentagon nearly every day for over twenty years. She didn't yell. She didn't throw anything. She just held a sign stating her opposition and walked back and forth, back and forth whenever she had the chance. Finally, one day one of the generals was heading home and he was passing her. He stopped her and said, "I see you every day out here. And I respect your determination- I do. But, I have to ask, you don't really think you're accomplishing anything, do you? There's no way on earth you're going to change what's going on around here." And the old woman didn't miss a beat, "Oh I'm not here to change you. I'm out here so that you don't change me." This woman cared deeply about the world, and she needed to speak up about her belief that our actions were threatening- regardless of whether others believed her effective or not. Acting out faith, sometimes leads us out into the world to bring about healing.

What issues do you feel strongly about- that you feel God might be calling you to become involved with? Where do you see the world hurting and feel you might be able to do some good?

Well finally, at the end of all this work, we get up with Jesus early in the morning, so early it is still dark, and we follow him out into a deserted place. And we see him sit down and begin to pray- begin to get himself ready to move on to the next town. What do you suppose that was like- to pray in the desert with the Holy One of God- to one whose life centers around healing? Can you imagine what this must have been like?

We don't know exactly what these moments alone for Jesus were like- all we know is that he took moments away, moments to be alone every chance he could. Like most of us, he was so busy he didn't have time for regular prayer times during the day like we think we're supposed to have. Like most of us, his schedule was so chaotic he didn't even have a regular weekly schedule. He simply took time when he was able- he took time to get away- to breathe- to restore himself. He took time, because Jesus, like every single one of us sitting here, is also part of the world, and as such, he deserved healing as well. *Tikkun olam*, healing the world, acting the faith- this doesn't mean absolute self-abnegation. This doesn't mean denying ourselves. This doesn't mean putting others before ourselves in a way that is damaging and destructive. One of the great truths we've learned in the last several decades is that when one gender, or one partner in any relationship, is always the one giving and never the one receiving- then giving, which is normally a blessing- becomes a curse and a burden.

Let us remember as we act the faith, when we make faith become a verb, that healing the world includes ourselves, too.

Where do you need healing? What parts of your own life are dry and cracked and need repair? In the next week where can you find a deserted place to heal?

So healing, healing in our homes and personal lives, healing our world, healing ourselves- this is what we are about as believers, as people who faith. If this still sounds like too great a task- I'd like to leave you with a true story from R. Wayne Willis- a longtime chaplain at a children's hospital in Louisville, Kentucky. Over the years he's collected dozens of prayers children had written on scraps of paper and shares these

prayers along with his thoughts- they are some of the best, most pure, and most simple examples of healing, of *tikkun olam*, that I know.

One child he knew, the child that gave him the idea for the book once wrote this prayer: “Thank you, Lord, for not letting it be any worst. I love you.” Willis shares this child’s story. He writes: There are few things like a visit to the hospital for a reality check, for putting life in perspective. One day I entered the burn unit of our hospital and my eyes immediately fixed on a new patient. He was seated in his room’s doorway in a wheelchair, bound in gauze from his waist up, with holes in the facial wrap for eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. I couldn’t tell whether the child was a boy or a girl until he told me his name. His name was Paul. He was five years old. Paul told me he had been badly burned in a fire at his house the day before. I noticed on his nightstand a beautiful medal and asked him what it was. He told me how a uniformed policeman had entered the unit earlier that day to visit someone else. When his eyes and Paul’s met, Paul attempted a wave with his rigid arm. The wave attempt stopped the policeman in his tracks. He turned and left the unit. The policeman returned a short time later with a Medal of Honor in his hand, a medal he had been awarded two weeks earlier. He walked into Paul’s room, draped the medal around Paul’s neck, and told him, “You deserve this more than I do. You’re a hero. This is for you.” (p. 1-2)

Was that simple act by that policeman, that tiny, simple, act- an act of the Gospel- of healing the world, of *tikkun olam*, faith in action? You bet it was. You bet it was. Today, let us give thanks for small things, tiny acts, and let us be open to those who need healing in our midst- whether they are at home, in the world, ourselves, or just trying to

wave to us and get our attention. Today, let us be kind, let us bind one another up, and let us not just keep the faith- but let's act it out, too. **Amen.**