

Sunday, January 30, 2005

A Sermon Preached by  
The Reverend Dr. Thomas K. Tewell



## Is Healing Still Possible?

Luke 8:40-56

Will You Pray With Me? Gracious and loving God, pour through me the gift of preaching as we consider a very complicated topic, one that hits many of us close to our hearts today. I pray that these words would touch everyone of us at our point of need and that we would leave here with a word of hope and encouragement. It's in the strong name of Jesus, the Christ, the Great Physician, that we pray. Amen.

"Praise ye the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation. Oh my soul praise God for God is our health and salvation."  
"Dr. Tewell," Kimberly said, "Do you believe in healing? I've been reading the gospel of Luke as you told us to do and enjoying the sermons about Luke this year. I know there's a lot of healing in Luke and Luke wrote Acts and there's also a lot of healing in Acts. But I'm wondering...do you believe that healing is possible today?"

How would you have answered Kimberly, a 40-year old fashion industry executive who a little over three months ago was diagnosed with a very rare and aggressive form of cancer? I told Kimberly that I do believe in healing. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Great Physician. I believe that God uses doctors and physicians and medication and therapists. God uses the Christian community and God acts in many ways to heal. God uses miracles to heal. I also told her that I believe that sometimes healing takes a different form than we want. How would you have answered Kimberly?

Is healing still possible today? As I look out around this congregation, I know there are many of you like Kimberly who are struggling. Some are waiting test results. Some are in a very difficult period of your life. Some of you are wondering if you are going to become whole again. I know there are some who are facing an illness and have been seeing a physician for a long time. I know there are many battling depression – the #1 psychological illness in America. This past week I read that a researcher in England recently claimed that the most depressing day of the year is the 24th of

**The gospel writer Luke tells us a lot about healing. He writes about it because he's an expert.**

January. The holidays are over. All the bills have come. You realize that it's going to be difficult to pay all those bills because you spent too much money. It's winter-time. It's cold and it's dark. You also realize that you've already broken all the New Year's resolutions that you made on January 1st. Oh dear, I'm getting depressed just thinking about all this. It's been said this is the most depressing time of the year. Is healing still possible today?

Today is election day in Iraq. There are high hopes and dreams for this election. Many in our nation and the world who really love peace and justice are divided on Iraq and wonder if the policies and strategies of our nation will really work in Iraq. This has caused great disagreement and you wonder if reconciliation and healing are possible among people who seem to look at reality so differently.

The gospel writer Luke tells us a lot about healing. He writes about it because he's an expert. Luke was a physician, a great physician. When physicians write, as many of them do, they tend to look at the whole picture. In fact, Luke was among the first of many brilliant physicians down through history who have become writers. John Keats was a physician. Robert Browning was a physician. Somerset Maugham, Anton Chekov and Walker Percy were physicians. When physicians write they often see a bigger world. Luke saw things that Matthew, Mark and John didn't see.

When Luke tells the story of Jairus, the great leader of the synagogue, and his 12-year old daughter, he puts that story in perfect juxtaposition with the story of the woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years. As we read this, we see the brilliance of Luke's strategy. Luke sees the whole picture. To understand this brilliant strategy, you need to know the greater context of this

story of healing. Earlier in Luke 8 we see Jesus becoming involved with the Gerasene demoniac – a naked man who’s been living in a cave and is possessed with a demon. The disciples, the Pharisees and the religious people wonder, why would Jesus get involved with this man? But Jesus’ mercy knows no boundaries. Jesus casts out the demon. The demon goes into the swine and the swine go over the cliff. Now all the swine herders are upset with Jesus but he even gets involved with them. You wonder why is he getting involved with all these people? Why is this even in the Bible? It’s in the Bible because Luke wants us to remember that there are no boundaries to God’s love.

Notice how brilliantly Luke, the physician, sets all that up and then in juxtaposition he puts these two stories of healing. Jairus’ daughter is 12. She’s his only daughter. (Matthew and Mark don’t even mention this story.) Jairus isn’t a father with 8 or 9 or 10 children. This is a father with only one daughter and she’s dying. He comes to Jesus. He’s the president of the Synagogue. As president he was in charge of everything from worship and leadership to caring and finances. He was the equivalent of the Clerk of Session, the President of the Board of Trustees and the Moderator of the Board of Deacons all rolled into one. He was the man! He had it all. But his only daughter was dying and he was scared to death.

Jairus goes to Jesus and pleads, “Jesus, my daughter is dying. Can you do something to save her?” Before Jesus can answer and before he can get to Jairus’ home, Luke inserts in the middle of this story the story of a woman who has been bleeding for the same amount of time that this young girl, Jairus’ daughter, has been alive. She is 12 and this woman has been hemorrhaging for 12 years. The woman doesn’t come to Jesus. Jesus is just walking down the road. People are following him. There’s a mob around him.

Have you ever been walking down Fifth Avenue in a crowd of people and they’re all around you? You feel as if you’re being jostled about. Maybe someone bumps you slightly with an elbow or a shoulder and you say excuse me. Well, Jesus was being jostled around. There were people all around him and in the midst of all the jostling, Jesus stops and says, “Somebody touched me.”

“Now Master, Peter said, “there are a lot of people around here. Somebody probably just bumped you.” “Somebody touched me,” Jesus repeated. “I felt power go out from me. Somebody has been healed. Who is it? There has been a healing.”

The woman who had been an outcast for 12 years because of the hemorrhaging was afraid to make eye contact with Jesus. Finally she came forward, eyes lowered, ashamed and Jesus looked at her and said, “My daughter, your faith has made you well.” Jesus didn’t

have to help this woman. He was on his way to Jairus’ home. Jairus was at the top of the social religious spectrum. The woman was an outcast. She was from the bottom of the social religious spectrum. She hadn’t even been allowed in the synagogue for worship. She was unclean. But Jesus went beyond all boundaries – let that push against you a bit. He had touched someone who was unclean and he gave her his own health and wholeness.

Mother Teresa was once asked by a reporter, “What’s the worst illness you’ve ever seen.” Mother Teresa didn’t have to think for even a moment. The reporter thought she would say AIDS or leprosy. But she said, “The worst disease is that of being unwanted.” When Jesus said to this dear woman, “My daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace,” he validated her as a human being. Jesus reached out of bounds and brought her back.

Luke, this brilliant physician, inserts that little story of an outcast who is healed into the midst of a story about a man, a religious leader of the day whose daughter is dying. Luke shifts the camera back to Jairus and his daughter. Before Jesus can get to Jairus’ home, someone comes and says, “Jairus, your daughter is dead.” You can imagine what Jairus was thinking. Why did Jesus take so much time with this outcast woman? Why did he do that when he could have been at my daughter’s bedside and she could have been healed? Have you ever had thoughts like this? Why did God give something to that person and I didn’t get it. I’ve been good. I’m the leader of the synagogue. I’m the Clerk of the Session. Why? Why? I mean, what gives here? Was that going through Jairus’ mind? Nevertheless Jesus said, “Jairus, we’re going to your home.” Did Jairus go in faith? Did he go believing there was going to be a miracle? All we know is that they went – Jairus, Jairus’ wife, Peter, James, John, Jesus and the woman. When they got to the bedside of the little girl, Jesus touched her and gently said “Child, wake up.” And she did. Everyone was astounded. They thought she was dead. Jesus said, “Give her food. Give her something to eat.”

God works through physicians, through nutrition, through exercise, through rest, through therapists. God works through the medical and spiritual communities. Out of this story there are so many questions. How much faith do you have to have to be healed? Do you need faith? Does Jesus have to touch you? Do you have to touch Jesus? Why are some healed and some don’t seem to be healed?

This morning as we step into these tumultuous waters of healing, I want to lift up to you the words of Robert McAfee Brown. Brown, a great theologian of the 20th century says, “Problems are to be solved; mysteries are to be wondered.” Healing is a mystery. It’s a part of

our faith. I share these thoughts with you not to solve the problem of healing, for it's bigger than all of us, but to open a little window, as Luke does, into this amazing theme of healing. As we try to understand healing, I ask you to remember these three words – tragedy, touch, and trust.

## **TRAGEDY**

Tragedy – it's all around us. Rabbi Kushner wrote *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People* because his three-year old son Aaron suffered from Progeria, advanced aging disease. This little three-year old boy looked like 60-year old man. He had wrinkles in his face. He died at the age of 14. Rabbi Kushner, a good man, a good rabbi, a wonderful communicator asked, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" This is not a new question. This is a question that was asked in Jesus' day. In John 9, Jesus' disciples came to him and said, "Rabbi, there's a man here born blind. Who sinned? This man or his parents that he was born blind?" People in Jesus' day believed in prenatal sin. You could sin even before you were in the womb. Jesus shook his head. It wasn't that anyone sinned. It was that the works of God might be made manifest within him. In other words, God has purposes greater than what we can imagine. Tragedy looks like tragedy to us because we see only one part of it. What Jesus is teaching us is that tragedy is not the last word on today. What's the formula then for being healed? The truth is there is no formula. Sorën Kirkegaard says we live our lives going forward, we understand them only looking backward.

In 1979 I met with a man and his wife who had a son the same age as Suzanne's and my son Ryan. Roger and Sandy came to see me. Their son Johnny had cancer. We prayed for Johnny. We had healing services for Johnny. We anointed Johnny with oil. But Johnny got worse and worse and worse. One night Roger came to me and said, "There has to be some sin in my own life." Roger talked about his whole life – his college years and the years before he and Sandy were married. He was trying to go over all the sins of his life and I said Roger, "It's not because you sinned that Johnny has cancer. It's not about that. God isn't like that." But Roger felt he had to go through all this.

I preached at Johnny's memorial service. Through Johnny's illness and death something happened to Roger and Sandy. I saw it before my eyes. They became involved with other parents who had children who were ill and dying. They were able to relate to them. They developed relationships with these kids because their own son had died. Soon Roger left his job with AT&T and went to work with an organization working with children and youth ministry. That was almost 26 years ago. Today thousands of people all over northern New

Jersey, New York, and New England have made a profession of faith because of Roger and Sandy. I'm not saying God caused their son to get cancer but I am saying that tragedy wasn't the last word. God can work through tragedy to bring some phenomenal good, if we trust that the problem isn't to be solved by us but a mystery to be wondered. But don't tell someone who is in the midst of the tragedy that God is going to work all this together for good someday. Just let them be in the tragedy and when they are ready as Roger and Sandy were ready, God will reveal that to them on God's own time.

## **TOUCH**

The second word after tragedy is the word touch. Notice the woman touched Jesus' garment. She touched the little hem of the garment. There was a little hem hanging from the garment four white threads, one blue thread. In Judaism those were the threads that signify that someone obeyed the Jewish law. The woman saw the garment and she touched it. She knew that when she touched his garment he would be defiled. Do you remember? Praise Ye The Lord the Almighty, the King of creation, oh my soul praise God for God is thy health and salvation. She realized that when she touched Jesus she was touching health and she was healed.

Numbers are symbolic in the Bible. Six is the number of evil. Six hundred and sixty-six in Revelation is the evil number. Seven is the number of completion. God took 7 days to complete the earth. Forty is a very long time. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. The people of Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness. The number 12 is the number for Israel - twelve tribes. Luke sees the whole picture. Maybe this woman with the hemorrhage is lost in Israel. Maybe Jairus' daughter is lost in Israel too. We heard a story of Jesus who crossed the boundaries for the Gerasene demoniac and the swine herders. Maybe Jesus will cross every boundary to show the world His love.

I know you've been watching these pro football games! I don't care much about pro football myself (Yeah, right!), but some of you have been watching these games and seen when the receivers reach out of bounds to catch a pass. The receivers reach out and catch these passes and bring the ball in bounds. Their hands are really out of bounds but they bring the ball in bounds and it's good because they reached out of bounds to bring it back. There's no length, Luke says in Chapter 8, to which God will not go to reach and save a lost person. There's no boundary God can't cross to bring us back with his touch.

Paul Brand, a doctor in India who works with leprosy, touched a young leper and said, "My son, you are going to get better." The young man sobbed and sobbed. Paul said, "You don't understand. You're going to get

better. We've discovered some new medications for leprosy and I've found the right one for you." The young man sobbed all the more. His sister finally said to Dr. Brand, "He isn't sobbing because of what you told him. He's sobbing because ever since he got leprosy nobody has touched him." The touch of Jesus makes us well. Remember – tragedy, touch and finally trust.

## TRUST

Do you really trust in God? Do you trust that God would go out of bounds to bring us back? This is such a mystery. It's beyond our hope. Why can some be healed and some don't seem to be healed?

Anthony Campolo tells a humorous story about how God will go out of bounds to do whatever God must do to bring people back. Tony Campolo is an evangelist, a Baptist from Eastern College in St. David's, Pennsylvania. He is a great sociologist, a learned man and a wonderful communicator. A few years ago, he was invited to preach at a Pentecostal Church and before the service they laid hands on him and prayed for him. He wanted to get all these hands off of him and get to preaching but soon they started praying for things in their own lives.

One man said, "Oh, Lord, be with Charlie Stoltzfus, my neighbor. You know Charlie, Lord. He's leaving his wife and three kids today and he's going off. Lord, we don't know where he's going. Find a miracle to bring him back. He lives at Exit 14A off the Pennsylvania Turnpike. You know, Lord, in that little trailer park. His is the first one on the right hand side." And Tony's thinking, oh brother, why is he giving God directions. God knows this guy and knows where he is. God created this guy. Tony just wants to get the hands off his head and start preaching.

Finally, he preaches the sermon. The service is over. He gets in his car and thankfully starts driving home. He's on the Pennsylvania Turnpike and he sees hitchhikers holding up signs – California, New York, Philadelphia. He passes by them but one guy has a sign that said "Anywhere." Tony said to himself I'm going to pull over. He pulled over, backed up, and the guy got in. Tony said, "I'm intrigued by your sign." The guy said, "Yeah, I don't care where I go, I'll go anywhere, I just have to get away from where I am." Tony said, "By the way, I'm Tony Campolo. What's your name?" The guy said, "Hi, I'm Charlie Stoltzfus."

So Tony drives on. When they get to Exit 14A Tony exits the Turnpike and starts driving back. The guy said, "Where are you going?" Tony said, "I'm taking you home." The guy said, "Now wait a minute. What do you mean you're taking me home." Tony said, "You left your wife and your three kids and I'm taking you home right now." The guy said, "You don't know where I live." Tony

said, "Yes I do, in the trailer park up here, in the first silver trailer on the right." And the guy said, "How do you know that? Who told you that?" Tony said, "God told me!" He pulls over, gets Charlie out of the car and goes into the trailer with him. Charlie and his wife and Tony spend time talking together. A year later he learned that Charlie and his wife had decided to stay together – their marriage was healed. Tony Campolo says that today, Charlie Stoltzfus is a pastor in California. I'll bet he's got a ministry to hitchhikers. There are no lengths to which God won't go to bring us back.

Did you hear this week? Prime Minister Sharon said he's a little bit optimistic. Mr. Abbas, the new head of the PLO, and he are starting to talk about a cease fire. There are no lengths to which God won't go to bring us back. We had seminars on the Middle East for years. Fifteen people came. Twenty-one people came. Suddenly the General Assembly makes a controversial vote and there's an arson threat on Presbyterian churches. We offer a seminar on the Middle East and over 150 people packed the 5th floor. I don't understand how this works but I do know that God can use everything for good and God will reach outside the bounds to bring us back. Maybe peace will come to the Palestinians and the Israelis in unusual ways through unusual mechanisms that we would never would have imagined. God is at work through all these things.

So Kimberly said, "Will you come over and pray with me?" A family member and a good friend were there. I came beside her and I knelt down to pray. "Before we pray, Tom, I just want to ask you, what if I'm not healed." I said, "Kimberly what do you mean?" She said, "What if I die?" I said, "Oh, honey, this is so hard to talk about but the truth is that you are going to die and so am I. We're all going to die. We're all terminal. If you're healed now physically, you will have more years on the earth and I'm praying for that. But that kind of healing isn't the ultimate healing. God loved the world enough to send Jesus Christ to die on the cross to pay the price for us so that the Resurrection would be the ultimate healing. When you die the ultimate healing is that you come alive in the kingdom of heaven. Whether you die at 40 or 70 or 80 or 110, you're going to die but God's going to give you a new body in heaven. The ultimate healing is the Resurrection. So I know you're going to be healed. I just don't know which form it will take."

She smiled at me and there was radiance in her face – 85 hours – just 85 hours later she died. I preached at her memorial service right here. The sanctuary was packed with young fashion designers from the fashion industry and they wanted to know where does the radiance come from when you're dying. I told them then as I tell you today, you get that kind of radiance from Jesus Christ, the Great Physician. Praise ye the Lord, the

Almighty, the king of creation. Oh my soul praise God for  
God is, God is, God is our health and salvation. Amen.

Dr. Tewell's sermons are available on CD or cassette tape .  
Visit our online store at [www.fapc.org/store/merchant.mvc](http://www.fapc.org/store/merchant.mvc)

**FIFTH AVENUE  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Seven West 55th St., NYC 10019

212.247.0490 . [www.fapc.org](http://www.fapc.org)

**REV. DR. THOMAS K. TEWELL**

SENIOR PASTOR

Dial-A-Prayer 212.246.4200 . Thought Line 212.246.4204

Copyright © 2005, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church  
All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.