

Healing Past, Present, and Future Generations

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The Reverend Erica Wimber Avena

July 18, 2021

Prayer: Holy God of Israel, ever present and moving among your people, we pray that you will draw us near to you, that in place of hostility there may be peace; in place of loneliness, compassion; in place of aimlessness, direction; and in place of sickness, healing; through Christ Jesus, in whom you draw near to us...

In Mark's gospel, Jesus' ministry invites us into a healing Sabbath. Where we are invited to enter into the work of healing and to reflect on what healing means for ourselves and for generations.

At a previous congregation a member confided in me that she had struggled with a rare genetic disease for most of her life. I expressed, of course, my sympathy, to learn of her struggle – but she wouldn't have my sympathy. She wanted to educate me – specifically, as her pastor, to hear her bear witness to what God was doing in this area of her life. Listen up! Hardly anyone is affected by what she is facing, yet she said it had become an evolving privilege in her life, to reckon with the matter of her healing, and to see how her healing can redeem the past, bring joy to her present life, and set the future free.

Um, what? Oh yes! She was diagnosed in her mid-40's, but had had symptoms as long as she could remember. It began with her grandmother, she told me. Her grandmother was a wonderful woman, she remembered, but had been so limited in so many ways. The family remembered her inability to finish things, to get herself places on time, to attend to many daily activities, sometimes it was too much for her to get a meal on the table. They remembered that she was often in a back bedroom resting. This woman was long since buried, but now it had come to light that she had this major debilitating genetic disease, it hadn't even been described in her lifetime. All that suffering, all the while undiagnosed. By describing it to those who remembered her, they were now, suddenly, able to reflect back on their memories and see her in a new light. They could see her luminous personality separated from the symptoms of her disease. These were not choices she had made, she was not lazy, it had not been a matter of her not loving them enough to get up and be part of their lives. She loved them, and she was sick. This retroactively healed their memories of her, allowing them to forgive her, to appreciate her, and permitted them to see her as a whole, healed woman.

It also released them from the way they had all been captive to her limitations, to her disease. The not really understanding why things were bad, were given a clear answer – it had a healing effect on the family – all of the generations that were living.

She went on to tell me that to stay on top of her disease not only required a constant monitoring, but also a total re-orientation to her lifestyle. Suddenly eating well and regular exercise were not optional, not something that gets crowded out by other priorities, but it had become a matter of very different long-term outlooks and quality of her present life. It was, for her, imperative. By attending to it daily, she was healing her present life. She had taken a hard look at the way she was spending her time, and was only doing the things that mattered to her most. And by focusing on what matters most, she found healing in her days... her quality of life was steadily improving with this new focus...

She did not have children herself, but she was in a position to become an advocate and resource for others who were living with this disease – a disease so rare her connections to others were entirely online – the vast majority of them out of state or international.

She gave this testimony about her healing journey having these three applications: backwards in time, in her present life, and reaching to the future generations. In the future it will be caught earlier and treated better, allowing for better life quality. She was promoting research and awareness.

It was as solid a description of the spirituality of healing as I have heard. Revealing the generational ripples of remembered pain, release from disease, and its healing not just for the individual, but also for everyone who loved them – the community around them.

Healing does have generational consequences.

The Gospel describes a hectic moment in Jesus' life. He is in the middle of some of the miracles he is best remembered for: walking on water, calming the storm, feeding the 5000. And more and more the people are coming to him to be healed. Of course they would. You'd be talking about a man who did things like that, too.

Bear in mind, the sick are not so much approaching him, as being brought to him. The sick are too sick to get up and move around. In the previous chapter in the crush of a crowd of people around Jesus, the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years reaches out to touch the fringe of his garment, which is translated here as "cloak".¹

My commentator, Joel Marcus, makes a point about this translation. The word "could mean a hem, but it is also the word used ...for the tassels worn by Jewish males at the four corners of their garments to remind them of God's commandments... since this commandment is a Biblical one, it is to be expected that most Jewish males would have complied."



*Here is a photo of a modern orthodox Jewish man, and you can see the fringes of his undergarment, worn underneath his shirt. The fringes are supposed to stay outside and visible:

Numbers 15:39 says: "the fringe is a constant reminder to Jews in every generation to observe 'all the commandments of the Lord.'"

The point of leaving them outside is to be a reminder, to everyone who sees him. He doesn't do anything with the fringes, they are a visual symbol. A symbol to all generations to observe all the commandments of the Lord...

I don't have a photo of Jesus, obviously, but what we know is that the wearing of the garment with these fringes has gone back to the time the Torah was received from Moses. Jesus likely looked a lot like others around him, otherwise, scholars reason, someone would have mentioned a visible difference. I can't think of any artistic rendering of Jesus with fringes on his clothing, but Mark is giving us a picture of just that. It's

¹ Mark 5:25-34

these fringes "...begging him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed."

So interesting that the fringe which is a reminder to Jews in every generation, is the vehicle of healing. Jesus' ministry was to radically reinterpret this history, to fulfill the law for the blessing of the people. All people. Including, but not limited to: the hungry, the vulnerable, the fearful, the outcast, the sick. The fringes symbolize the law's graciousness to every generation, and Jesus is opening that up to apply to all. We say it every Sunday in worship here: "whoever you are or wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

The reference to the fringe of Jesus' garment, then, provides a fitting transition to the passage coming up in which Jesus will argue with the Pharisees about scripture and tradition. ² He is literally wearing the symbols of the tradition in this conversation. Christians often misread this as Jesus arguing against the Jews, but he is a Jew, among Jews, having a Jewish conversation. Which is, in and of itself, well established as an act of Jewish faithfulness.

Jesus invites us to a healing Sabbath. Where we are invited to enter into the work of healing and to reflect on what that means for ourselves and for the generations. Jesus healed past, present, and future generations.

I'd like to pause there, asking you to imagine Jesus wearing his tunic or cloak ... with its fringes. And if you were to reach your hand out, to touch him with your own fingers. What healing miracle would be on your heart today? Where do you find yourself in the spirituality of healing – healing something from the past (recasting it in light of new knowledge), working on the present set of concerns, or setting things up to affect the future more positively.

Some healing is obvious enough to us, some of it we will never know. The appendix that was removed, the cancer that was cured, the accident that no one was injured in, the strep throat that was healed, the insulin that prolongs a life. So much of the biggest effects of healing are invisible. Because the future chain of events has been altered.

Many of you have received your Covid19 vaccines. And we are all wondering, together, about when and if we will need a booster shot. What would have happened if we had not? How would our lives be different? Who would we have lost? Who would have lasting effects from Covid19 and is free of them now? We are collectively seeking to do a miracle of healing. Armed with nothing more than our ability to encourage one another, to wear masks, to value fresh air, and those vaccines.

Jesus invites us to a healing Sabbath. Where we are invited to enter into the work of healing and to reflect on what that means for ourselves and for the generations. As people of faith, I invite you to renew your commitment to this healing work as well. Today, we are one another's healers. A reminder to every generation. Jesus continues to heal the generations: past, present and future. It's an invitation to all of us.

© 2021 The Rev. Erica Wimber Avena
First Church West Hartford
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107

² *Mark 1-8, The Anchor Bible*, by Joel Marcus, Yale University Press 2005; pp. 439