

“How to Heal Like Jesus in Just One Easy Step”
Epiphany 5B (February 4, 2018)
Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone's shoulder, and let it matter. Amen.<<

Kate Bowler's article in last week's *New York Times* was, in my opinion, a truly great piece of writing.¹ With biting sarcasm and wit, Bowler - a professor at Duke Divinity School - shared her story of battling stage IV colon cancer. “Every 90 days,” she writes, “I lie in a whirling CT machine, dye coursing through my veins.” “I live for three months,” she goes on, “take a deep breath and hope to start over again. I will probably do this for the rest of my life. Whatever that means. When my scan is over, I need to make clear to my friends and my family that though I pray to be declared cured, I must be grateful. I have three more months of life. Hallelujah,” she writes, without an exclamation mark. “I am keeping vigil in the place of almost death.”

Bowler goes on to describe the *social* side of her suffering, sharing several cringe-worthy encounters with people who, one can only assume, mean well. “I was recently at a party in a head-to-toe Tonya Harding costume,” writes Bowler, “my blond wig in a perfect French braid, and a woman I know spotted me from across the dance floor. ‘I guess you’re not dying!’ she yelled over the music, and everyone stopped to stare at me. ‘I’m working on it!’ I yelled back, after briefly reconsidering my commitment to pacifism. ... [W]hen it comes to small talk,” continues Bowler, “I am the angel of death. I have seen people try to swallow their own tongue after uttering the simple words ‘How are you?’ I watch loved ones devolve into stammering good wishes and then devastating looks of pity. ... [One time] a friend came back from Australia with a year’s worth of adventures to tell, and ended with a breathless ‘You have to go there sometime!’ He lapsed into silence, seeming to remember at that very moment that I was in the hospital. And I didn’t know how to say that the future was like a language I didn’t speak anymore.”

To me, Bowler's story is so moving because she asks the question: What does a suffering person *really* want? What they *don't* want, she writes, is to have their pain minimized. “My sister was on a plane from Toronto to visit me in the hospital and told her seatmate why she was traveling,” writes Bowler. “[T]he stranger explained that my cancer was vastly preferable to life during the Iranian revolution.” “I am a professor at a Christian seminary,” Bowler goes on, “so a lot of Christians like to remind me that heaven is my true home, which makes me want to ask them if they would like to go home before me. Maybe now?” Other people tried to cheer Bowler up by saying that at least she wasn't suffering like Job in the Bible. Though one person did actually say, “‘I hope you have a ‘Job’ experience’.” “I can't think of anything worse to wish on someone,” says Bowler. Job lost everything. “Sometimes,” she says viciously, “I want every know-it-all to send me a note when they face the grisly specter of death, and I'll send them a poster of a koala that says, ‘Hang in there!’” “To so many people, I am no longer just myself. I am a reminder of a thought that is difficult for the rational brain to accept: that the elements that constitute our bodies might fail at any moment.” “I am the angel of death.”

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/opinion/sunday/cancer-what-to-say.html>

...Reading Bowler's story this week drew me into the social side of suffering - what scholar John Dominic Crossan calls "the social dimension" of illness.² It's the dimension of isolation and loneliness - "otherness" - where a party is stopped cold after an insensitive comment makes every head turn toward the person with the illness. A suffering that's felt when well-wishers make bumbling jokes or offer flimsy theology about "true homes" and "life-lessons from Job," or compare a person's suffering to that of someone else: "At least it's not as bad as...." Fill in the blank. Social suffering is a world of awkward glances and awkward small-talk and awkward silences, where the sick person's very presence casts a shadow that seems like a brooding Angel of Death. Kate Bowler asks, What does a suffering person *really* want?

What did those hurting throngs who flocked to Jesus really want? Today's gospel reading from Mark says the "whole city" of Capernaum came out to meet him - an ancient city with a population bigger than Ithaca College. Mark may be exaggerating here, but his point is that Jesus drew a crowd. They huddled close to him with ailments that ranged from fevers to sundry sicknesses to possession to contagious skin diseases. Maybe some of them even had cancer; though it wasn't called that back then. The suffering crowd wanted more than just a clean bill of health from this charismatic healer - more than just the fever to break, the illness to leave, the demon to flee, the skin to become like a baby's. Suffering in antiquity, like suffering today, had a social side - social, like that of Kate Bowler's.

We see this kind of suffering in the first part of today's reading from Mark. Peter's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever when Jesus arrived at her house. She didn't just suffer from a high temperature and a hot forehead with chills. Her pain was also a social pain: she was unable to provide hospitality to her guests, which in the ancient world was social death. A guest in your home - and in this story the guest is no less than Jesus himself - a guest was to be treated like royalty. It's why the parable Jesus once told in Luke's gospel about the returning prodigal son ends so powerfully: the son had blown his inheritance on parties and luxuries, and returned home feeling diminished as a human being. But the father rushes out to meet him, and orders a feast to be prepared, treating his prodigal son with the honor befitting a royal guest. In Mark's story, the suffering of Peter's mother-in-law is multiplied because she can't honor her guests. And so, Jesus touches her forehead, and immediately, writes Mark, she began serving everyone food.

And what of those hurting throngs? Mark doesn't tell us much about them, so we use our imaginations. I imagine them huddled in their homes and hovels, suffering alone and silently. Isolated. Perhaps *they* were surprised to see how many others in their city were suffering like them as they all trekked out to meet Jesus. I imagine them seeing friends and neighbors they never knew were in pain; and they weren't alone anymore.

But it's the last part of today's reading from Mark that is the most striking to me. It's one of my favorite stories in the whole Bible: the cleansing of the man with leprosy. It's just seven verses long, but worth spending some time with. As Mark tells it, a man with leprosy approaches Jesus and asks to be healed. Simple and straightforward, not unlike the many other healings of individuals in the gospels. But this story is different, because Mark's Greek grammar pricks the emotions. A man with leprosy approaches Jesus and drops to his knees, writes Mark, begging for healing. Mark's grammar connotes something passionate and

² John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 81.

persistent. The man is pleading - pleading to, in his words, "be clean." He doesn't say "heal me," or "cure me"; he says, "clean me up." The man feels dirty because of his illness; he feels like an outsider, like an "other," like an "angel of death" casting a shadow. Lepers in his day were cut off from entering the temple in Jerusalem - in effect, cut off from God - until a priest examined every square inch of their bodies, and pronounced them "clean." And lepers, in his day, were quarantined in colonies outside the city. This man shouldn't have been anywhere near people, let alone Jesus. I imagine him stumbling toward Jesus, aware that the crowds of people have parted like the Red Sea to get away from him. I imagine crowds on either side of the street, and just the man and Jesus in the center. Seeing the man on his knees, hearing his cries, Jesus, says Mark, was "moved with pity." Three words in English; one word in Greek. It means something like: Jesus felt this man's pain in his guts, in his belly. He felt the many ways this man was suffering; felt his shame, felt his isolation and loneliness, perhaps even heard the insensitive words of well-wishers, the hushed comments of whisperers looking on from a safe distance - all contributing to this man's suffering.

There are two miracles in this story. The obvious one is that a man with leprosy met Jesus and left clean. But there's a prior miracle, one that's easy to miss when casually reading Mark's gospel. It's the miracle of touch. Mark elongates the language, drags it out: Jesus, writes Mark, "stretched out his hand, and touched the man." *Touched* the man. There are many healings performed by Jesus in the gospels. With a word he could pronounce someone healed: your faith has made you well, go in peace, he said to one person. "Come out," he said to a dead Lazarus; and the dead man walked out of the tomb. Jesus could've just said to this begging man with leprosy, "be clean." But he *touches* him first. It's a miracle. No one touched a leper in the ancient world, not even a priest. They were looked at, scoffed at, isolated in island communities; just touching a leper would render a person unclean and unfit to enter the temple. Lepers were cut off from family, friends, even from God. But Jesus felt this man's pain in his guts, felt the *social* side of his suffering - what Martin Luther King Jr. once called "social leprosy." And so, writes Mark, Jesus "stretched out his hand," and did what no one else would do. He transformed this man from "leper" into "human being" with a simple, compassionate touch.

...What *does* a suffering person really want? This question asked by Kate Bowler in her *New York Times* piece is a timeless question, because people in every age suffer. When I taught Introduction to the Study of Religion in Toronto, I did a unit on the paranormal: exorcisms in South America, snake-handling in Appalachia, evangelists in Nigeria who claimed to call down rain from the sky (there's a YouTube video that documents this - though I think it was doctored a bit). I also had my students study faith healers, who gather throngs in stadiums and claim to heal with the wave of a hand so that a person on crutches can start dancing on stage. One clever YouTuber, superimposed a lightsaber onto a faith-healer's hand so that he looked like a Jedi Knight whacking people with a sword. (People online are very inventive.) But there's more to healing than just the physical, because there's more to illness than just the physical. There's a social-isolation-side. A loneliness side, like that leper who could scatter a crowd of people with his mere presence, or like Kate Bowler, who felt like an angel of death.

"When I originally got my diagnosis at age 35," writes Bowler, "all I could think to say was, 'But I have a son.' It was the best argument I had." It's interesting to me that it wasn't the cancer diagnosis itself that caused Bowler's initial suffering; it was the thought that she might

be cut off from her son. It was a social-kind-of-suffering. Perhaps this was the reason why a nurse at the cancer clinic once sat down next to Bowler, and said “softly: ‘I’ve been meaning to tell you. I lost a baby.’ The way she said ‘baby,’” writes Bowler, “with the lightest touch, made me understand. She had nurtured a spark of life in her body and held that child in her arms, and somewhere along the way she had been forced to bury that piece of herself in the ground. I might have known by the way she smoothed all my frayed emotions and never pried for details about my illness. She knew what it was like to keep marching long after the world had ended.”

“A tragedy,” writes Bowler, “is like a fault line. A life is split into a before and an after, and most of the time, the before was better. Few people will let you admit that out loud. ... But acknowledgment is also a mercy. It can be a smile or a simple ‘Oh, hon, what a year you’ve had.’ It does not ask anything from me but makes a little space for me to stand there in that moment. ... There is tremendous power in touch,” she writes, “in gifts and in affirmations when everything you knew about yourself might not be true anymore. I am a professor, but will I ever teach again? I’m a mom, but for how long? A friend knits me socks and another drops off cookies, and still another writes a funny email or takes me to a concert. These seemingly small efforts are anchors that hold me to the present, that keep me from floating away on thoughts of an unknown future. They say to me, like my sister ... did on one very bad day: ‘Yes, the world is changed, dear heart, but do not be afraid. You are loved, you are loved. You will not disappear. I am here.’”

...What does a suffering person want? Just be there. Walk with them. Help to take the social sting out of suffering. We can’t suffer for them. But we can put an arm around them. And *that is* a healing act. Amen.