

## **MAYBE THE POINT IS NOT TO BE HEALED**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: I Kings 17:17-24; Mark 9:14-29

The stories of the resuscitation of the widow's son in Zarephath, and the story of the restoration of the boy with seizures who appeared to be dead in Mark's gospel have similarities and differences. They give us an insight into how to live in an imperfect world in which things don't go smoothly, the trains don't always run on time, even those who are the ones we trust most fail us, and broken pieces are sometimes hard to put back together again.

In the story of the widow in Zarephath, Elijah goes where God orders him to go, a pagan land, beyond the pale of Israel on a mission of healing. He stops at the gate of the town and has a conversation with a widow who is gathering sticks for a fire to bake some bread, just enough to give herself and her son a final morsel to sustain them, and then, because there is a famine, she expects that she and her son will starve to death.

But Elijah has another plan in mind. He blesses the cruse of oil she has, and the grain meal that she will use for the bread and, miraculously, they will never run out.

The plot thickens when the ailing boy starts to fail and Elijah must administer cardio pulmonary resuscitation or at least its Biblical equivalent. Elijah takes the boy to an upper room and lays on him with the full weight of his body three times, and somehow the boy is revived. All's well that ends well and the widow, seeing that her son is restored declares that Elijah is a man of God, and that he is holy - which is a lot for a pagan woman to say.

But before we declare this a story of "happily ever after," let me just say that if you remember the scene described by the writer of I Kings, Elijah is not exactly a paragon of faith amid crisis. He is scared witless about the outcome of this very sick boy, who is living with his widowed mother and who is clearly close to death. Elijah has been sent, not to God's own people, but to Zarephath, beyond the pale of Israel to do God's will.

And Elijah is not certain about God's choices in this matter. He cries out, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity upon this widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?"

This is hardly what I would call an expression of inspired faith! Elijah is on much firmer ground when he prays to God, "O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again." And with that the boy recovered and Elijah led the boy downstairs and gave him again to his mother.

You know what I really like about this story is that it's real, it's gritty. Elijah is not some tower of spiritual strength. He's scared like an intern in the E.R. on her first day in the hospital treating patients. Here is a medical problem of true life-threatening possibility and he is the only mediator that stands between life and death for this boy.

Unlike what we expect of healing stories this is not an easy case. Elijah must throw himself on this boy three times. Not once. Not twice, but three times. *It's not working*, whatever Elijah is doing. *It's not working*, until the third time when Elijah's ministrations take effect. Only after giving it more than the college try three times over the boy comes to life.

It's not all that different in the story from Mark's gospel where we encounter the disciples who have been charged by Jesus earlier in chapter 6, verses 7 and 13, where we read,

*He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits...So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.*

But in this case the disciples had run into a real stumper. There was a boy who had what we might describe today as epileptic seizures. And they gripped the boy, and prevented his speaking, and threw him to the ground, and caused him to foam at the mouth. Scared everybody in town, and startled the horses, that boy.

His father had taken him to the disciples hearing that they were in town and doing healings and working wonders. But for some reason they were not having much success with this kid. After several tries, he was still having seizures.

Along comes Jesus who hears a ruckus going on and tries to mediate. *Que pasa?* he asks. Or more familiarly, "What the heck's going on?" And then he hears the story from the father about the boy's medical history and how the disciples have tried to heal him, but with no joy.

So the father says to Jesus, *If you are able* – do something, because all things can be done by God, (which is a more faithful translation than, "all things are possible to those who believe.") Now it isn't often that we see Jesus blow his cool, but when he says back to the father, "*If you are able*," he sounds downright contemptuous, representing divine impatience with unbelief.

Fred Craddock writing about the phrase *If you are able* says, "That all things are possible is neither an abstract principle inherent in the scheme of things nor a matter of human faith or optimism, but a confession in the Lord God Almighty."<sup>1</sup>

Corrected by Jesus and now down to the brass tacks of self-confession, the father says, "I believe, help my unbelief." And can we identify with that! Sometimes we believe and sometimes we don't. In the doctor's office waiting for the test results we believe, in the car after the diagnosis we're not so sure.

Sitting by the bedside with the baby sick, we want to believe, when the fever goes up we're not so sure.

Standing in front of all those people with the wedding gown on and those promises sounding so heartfelt, we believe. When the shouting argument comes, we're not so sure.

Starting the new job, we believe in blessings and God's favor. But when they tell you you'll be training your replacement, we're not so sure.

So which is it? Do we believe or don't we believe? Paul Tillich, the oft-quoted theologian of the last century once said, "faith takes doubt into itself."<sup>2</sup> And Fred Craddock writing about this passage says, "The man does not say something like, "I partly believe and partly doubt." Or "I sort of believe and sort of doubt." The man believes and also does not believe.<sup>3</sup>

That's the way faith works, you know. It's "both-and," not "either-or." We are only human and therefore we are a mixture of faith and doubt.

But getting back to the disciples who were unable to heal the boy... what went wrong? What wasn't right? Well, the disciples had been doing some good work. "They cast out many demons," Mark tells us, "and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them."

So what went wrong, how come the disciples couldn't heal the boy? Well, they asked Jesus about it later, after he had raised the boy from a severe attack which struck him down so that "he looked like a corpse," and Jesus had to take him by the hand and raise him. The disciples wanted to know, "How come you could raise him and we couldn't, Jesus?"

"Oh this kind can only come out through prayer," he said. And I imagine the disciples must have scratched their heads and wondered about that because they had prayed. They had prayed.

It's not that the disciples didn't know how to pray, it's that Mark was talking over the heads of the disciples, to the post-Easter reader of the story, and not to the Twelve standing there that day. Mark does that sometimes – teaches the post-resurrection church at the price of the church that early on walked with Jesus.

"I believe, help my unbelief," the father said to Jesus. "We tried," the disciples told the Lord, "but our prayers were not enough." Elijah had a heck of a time raising that widow's son out of his cardiac arrest, or out of death, or whatever it was that took three attempts to save him. Sometimes God just doesn't respond on command to our attempts to rouse. After all if God is just doing what we want in life, then we are taking God's place. And that doesn't work so well from what I can tell.

I like these stories - the disciples out on a mission finding their powers of healing are not enough. Elijah sent to a widow with a son who is sick and dying and he has to try three times to heal the boy, putting all the body English on it that he can. A father who wants the best for his son, but fears he does not have enough faith, "I believe," he says, "Help my unbelief," because they're both real.

These would be our stories were they not already in the Bible. Were they not already our stories. Broken vessels trying to make everything all right, better than new, as if the world were perfect, no threats, no dangers, no illness, no failures, nothing to stand in the way of everything working out just the way we want.

But things aren't perfect, they're not all right. Some diseases can only be healed by the power of the resurrection. Some belief is mixed with unbelief. Some prayers are not God's prayers but ours.

I had an aunt now long gone, my mother's sister who was not my favorite aunt but I spent a lot of time with her and she was thoughtful and kind and a decent person at heart. It's just that she was broken, in a lot of different places and so not very happy in life.

My uncle, her husband, who was a World War I veteran was a nice man, although I think not a very happy person either. In my aunt's house nothing was ever broken, nothing ever out of its place. You would never find shoes taken off and left by the sofa. The carpets were always vacuumed, the "hutch" as she called it dusted and waxed with Pledge, the windows clean, the kitchen floor scrubbed with Pine Sol, the basement ordered and dry and boxed and labeled, "Christmas ornaments," "cleaning rags," "tax files."

My aunt had a dog, but I am sure there was never an accident on the rug anywhere, the dog knew better than that. I used to go to my aunt's house for lunch occasionally when school let out early and my mother was still at work. My aunt's house was just a couple of blocks from the elementary school I attended, and if I did go to my aunt's she always had the same lunch ready, small baked potato with one pat of butter, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on white bread cut with the edges off, and a glass of milk. Always the same, perfectly cut, ready on time, no variations. It was all perfect at my Aunt Pauline's house.

It didn't seem real to me there. You couldn't be imperfect or even just human. You had to be perfect, flawless, no problems, no complications. It wasn't real there.

A day came when my cousin, her son, fifteen years old got a rifle from the house and holed up in the kitchen, threatening to shoot anyone that came in. The police surrounded the house. And fortunately, no one was hurt when the police stormed in the back door and disarmed him.

But the perfect life was exposed for what it was, because it never was that perfect there. Nobody's home is that perfect. Every day a baked potato and a peanut butter sandwich on white bread. The perfection was the imperfection.

Anne Lamott writes in her book, *Hallelujah Anyway*, something about *imperfection* that I like. She says,

*The ancient Chinese had a practice of embellishing the cracked parts of valued possessions with gold leaf, which says: We dishonor it if we pretend that it hadn't gotten broken. It says: We value this enough to repair it. So it is not denial or cover-up. It is the opposite, an adornment of the break with gold leaf, which draws the cracks into greater prominence. The gold leaf becomes part of its beauty. Somehow the aesthetic of its having been cracked but still being here, brought back not to baseline but restored, brings increase.<sup>4</sup>*

How is it Ernest Hemingway put it? “The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places.” Sometimes the point is not to be healed, to bear the scars of wounds that are past, because it’s okay to be imperfect. Maybe even better to accept ourselves that way, the way God does.

I have discovered again in recent months the value of watching *The Antique Roadshow* on PBS. It’s a good distraction when waiting for the bomb to go off and the world to be crisped. I’m looking for those kinds of distractions these days. Aren’t you?

I also recommend Family Feud as another mindless distraction when you can’t watch any more of Rachel Maddow or Lawrence O’Donnell or Anderson Cooper. I have not taken up Candy Crush yet, but I may. The world is such a mad place now, so broken and possibly impossible to fix without great tragedy, between the Russians and the Syrians, and the North Koreans and us.

But, back to *The Antiques Roadshow*. Have you noticed that some people foolishly oil and polish and rub off the patina of old things? Or they replace the original iron hardware of the 1700’s because it’s not as attractive or functional as something new? And the other night there was a man who pasted old baseball trading cards onto a frame so that the cards would be uniformly mounted and visible on the opposite side... you know Ty Cobb’s batting stats, or Lou Gehrig’s home runs that season – all done with the best of intentions, by gluing them onto the frame. Funny how people trying to make things look better inevitably destroy the value of the object.

Better to leave the nick in the Chippendale table leg than smear some shoe polish on the crack and ruin the color.

There are a lot of things that we can learn from the healing stories of the scriptures. But of all the stories in both testaments I like the ones that are a bit imperfect, the ones that don’t work out the first time; like Jesus putting spit on the blind man’s eyes twice,<sup>5</sup> or like the story of Elijah having a very hard time bringing back the widow’s son from his near-death experience. Or the disciples trying so hard to heal the boy stricken with convulsions and failing to do so. And the father in that story confessing that he believes and he doesn’t believe all at the same time. Messy, not neat stories, not perfect, but very human. A lot like us.

These Biblical accounts remind me that they are not just about a land far away and a time long ago, but about real people who didn’t always get it right, who struggled with faith and found they were imperfect. who knew they were broken, as we are broken, and so the stories are remembered with gold leaf added to those places where there have been chips and fractures and breaks, to remind us of what we have been through and what we have learned and how we’ve gotten as far along as we have.

Faith is always a mixture of belief and unbelief, not *a little bit* of both, but *a lot* of each. The gold leaf repairs, the obvious imperfections become a part of the beauty, the fault lines a part of the strength.

I am worried about the world, and aren't we all? We live in perilous and scary times. And our national leaders do not know how to lead any more except in ways that seem like a runaway rollercoaster. These are imperfect times for flawed people.

But perhaps we are learning to gold leaf the imperfections, draw attention to the places where we have become broken, and not expect to hide our faults because in hiding them we participate in the illusion that they never were.

We cannot have a perfect world. And maybe what God is teaching us is that we must learn to live with the imperfections that we have.

If so, the point is not to be healed, but to live with the broken parts, gold leafed, remembered, showing us where we went wrong and learning that this side of heaven, nothing is perfect save God alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, **The People's New Testament Commentary**. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2004. 147.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Craddock, 148.

<sup>3</sup> Craddock, 148.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Lamott, **Hallelujah Anyway**. Riverhead Books: New York, 2017. 50.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 8:19-29