

“Who Can Be Healed?”

June 28, 2009

Mark 5:21-43

Karen Armstrong has coined what I think is a great phrase. She calls herself a “freelance monotheist.”

As I understand her, the *monotheist* part of her description means that she experiences something wondrous that is beyond, beneath, embedded in, and unrestricted by the material world that can be dominated by human wants, needs, perspectives, and egos. This something wondrous is what others call “God,” “Yahweh,” “Allah,” or “Great Spirit,” to name but a few.

And, as I understand her, the *freelance* part of Armstrong’s identity as a “freelance monotheist” comes from the fact that she has found, in all the religious traditions she has studied, a richness, a wisdom, and a heart of compassion at their core, and she doesn’t feel a call to settle down in any one particular tradition. She has respect and love for all traditions, and, in essence, she calls all of them “home.”

One of the things this means to me is that when Karen Armstrong writes about Christianity, she’s *not* writing as an atheist, an opponent, or a debunker. She’s writing, instead, as a loving, appreciative critic ... so, when she speaks about the Christian tradition, I’m inclined to listen. And one of the things I’ve been listening to her say in the last few years is that Christianity took a bad turn in the road when it became more and more focused on what people should *believe*, while neglecting to focus on how people should *live*.

Armstrong and others have noted that, somewhere along the road, the dominant understanding and expression of Christianity changed from being rooted in a vision of life *together*, in which blessings and burdens are shared, to being rooted in a vision of *personal* salvation on the basis of *personal* belief. Somewhere along the road, the predominant form of Western Christianity lost the early church’s focus on community – the focus that we encounter in Paul’s letters and in the Book of Acts, where we hear that everyone shared everything they had, so that there was not one needy person among them.

As Armstrong sees it, this turn in the Christian road has had many damaging consequences, which have eroded the spiritual life and compassionate calling of the church. It’s also had some strange consequences, one of which played out several years ago in the Enron scandal. As you may remember, the head of Enron and a number of his cohorts at the company lied, cheated, and swindled thousands and thousands of people out of millions and millions of dollars.

It’s not the greed at the center of this story that I find strange ... greed’s been around too long to seem strange at this point. No, what I found strange was the religious twist. News media reported that the late Ken Lay and other Enron executives considered themselves faithful Christians and yet, even though they had caused great harm to others and even though they believed in a literal hell, they were convinced they would not face divine retribution and punishment, simply because they had long ago accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. According to news reports, it seemed as if Lay and others were saying that, as long as you believe in Jesus, what you do doesn’t affect your

relationship with Jesus or God, and it doesn't affect the health and future of your own soul. In effect, that makes belief a "Get out of jail free" card, figuratively if not literally. And that's an idea I'd call "strange."

I'd also like to call it an aberration, a perversion of Jesus' message, something that originated long after Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. To create a distance between Progressive Christianity and that strangeness, I might also do what Protestants have long done with parts of the tradition we don't like – blame it on the Catholic Church, since it was the only church in town or in the Western world for centuries. I might like to use one or more of those approaches, but this morning's reading from the Gospel of Mark stops me in my tracks. It puts a stumbling block, a boulder, if you will, right in the middle of the road. This morning's story – or story within a story – forces me to slow down and listen carefully, before trying to absolve Jesus or the early church from any responsibility for the idea that belief is the most important thing in the life of faith.

The problem is this: These stories of Jarius and the unnamed woman who is healed when she touches Jesus' clothing come from Mark, the oldest gospel in the New Testament, a gospel written long before there was anything like an organized church, Catholic or otherwise. And as these stories portray him, Jesus says, explicitly, "Your faith has made you well," to the woman, and "Do not fear, only believe," to the leader of the synagogue. So even if Karen Armstrong is right, that it was a later development in the Christian tradition that focused on what one believed, and not how one lived, as the central message of Christianity, it sure looks like that later development could claim to be rooted in this morning's reading.

So what's a preacher to do? What's someone who wants to follow Jesus to do? What's this Christian church to do? I'd like to suggest that we start by realizing what we don't know. We don't know just what Jesus or the gospel writer meant by the words that have been translated as "faith" and "believe." We don't know how different our understanding of those words might be from Jesus' understanding or the early disciples' understanding. We don't know whether there's any real connection between what Jesus meant by "faith" and "believe" and what the institutional church hammered out much later with the Apostle's Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Nicene Creed, or any other creed.

After we've recognized some of what we don't know, I'd like us also to remember or recognize what we do know ... about this church and the denomination to which we belong, the United Church of Christ. One of the things we know is that we are a non-creedal church. Locally and nationally, we do not take the position that belief is a test of faith or a test of the Christian faith. We do not require a profession of faith for membership. We do not categorize people on the basis of what they do or don't believe. We recognize that belief can *guide* a faithful life, but we also recognize that insistence on a particular set of beliefs can close us, as churches and as individuals, to the ever-new movements of the Spirit of God.

And then let's take those two things – a recognition that we don't know what Jesus and the gospel writers meant by "faith" and "believe" and a mindfulness that the UCC does not itself believe that the Christian life is a matter of a particular set of beliefs – and ask what gifts this morning's reading about a distraught father and an unnamed woman might have to offer. What might it mean that Jesus tells the woman that her faith has made her well? What might it mean that Jesus tells Jarius not to fear, but to believe?

Let's take a closer look at these stories and the two people who seek help, healing, and wholeness from Jesus. The first is Jarius, a leader of the synagogue. Even though other religious leaders have been suspicious of Jesus and, in the end, will conspire to have him killed, Jarius is willing to approach him and trust him. Jarius is willing to leave his status behind, to seek out an itinerant preacher who keeps breaking the more confining religious rules of the day, and then Jarius humbles himself, publicly and repeatedly, by begging for Jesus' help.

Before Jesus is able to help Jarius and his daughter, though, someone else appears in the story, and this someone else is almost the mirror image of Jarius, almost an anti-Jarius. This someone else is a woman, and it's no small accident that we don't learn her name. She is one of dozens and dozens of women in the Bible whose names have been erased but whose lives tell a truth so powerful that their stories proved to be un-erasable. This woman has been hemorrhaging for a dozen years, so in addition to having a low status simply because she's a woman, she also has low status because she has been ritually unclean for years. She had spent all her money on doctors, but they had not been able to make her well. So she is powerless, penniless, and probably close to hopeless.

Unlike Jarius the powerful leader, this woman does not need to humble herself to be able to reach Jesus. She doesn't have any privilege and position to leave behind in order to encounter God through Jesus. Instead, she has to have the boldness of someone who has nothing more to lose, the courage to have hope in the face of repeated failure, and the strength to push through the crowds to claim her right to be near Jesus.

This small portion of the Gospel of Mark points us to two extremes in human life – the powerful, privileged one whose importance guaranteed that we would still know his name 2000 years later and the powerless, anonymous woman who has run out of money and options. In Jesus, these two people meet. In Jesus, these two people seek something that they haven't been able to find anywhere else. From opposite ends of the social, economic, and political scales, these two seek and find healing in and through Jesus.

What, then, can all this teach us about the meaning of her faith and his belief? What can all this offer us about how it is we can be healed in mind and spirit, whether or not physically healing is possible?

What I hear is that her faith and his belief were in a God who comes to us in unexpected ways, through unexpected people like Jesus. I hear that her faith and his belief were in *possibility*, the possibility that lies beyond what we have already seen and heard and known and believed. I hear that they became people for whom healing was available because they dared to believe the old ways that hadn't worked were not the only ways God had to offer.

So ... what we have already seen and known and believed is only the beginning. The Holy One comes to us through the Living Christ, through the Living Spirit, refusing to be confined by what we can name or envision or imagine ... or believe. The faith and belief that can make healing and wholeness possible are not focused on specific religious doctrines or formulations. The faith and belief that make healing and wholeness possible are rooted, instead, on an openness to surprises and a willingness to trust that God is at work in all people, at all times, and in all places.

So whether you consider yourself a Christian, a freelance monotheist, or something else entirely, healing and wholeness can come through you, into your life and into the world. The Spirit of the Living Christ is ready to meet you, surprise you, and bless you.

For that and for so much more, thanks be to God.
Amen.

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