

“Healing Survivors”

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¹He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ²On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

(Mark 6: 1-13)

In his 1928 play “The Angel that Troubled the Waters,” playwright Thornton Wilder uses as a backdrop the gospel story of the pool of Bethesda, which was said to have healing powers. A doctor who is suffering from crippling depression joins the crowd of blind, lame, and ailing persons around the pool. When the waters mystically stirred, whoever reached the water first would be healed, or so the story went. The physician had a leg up on the competition – he was younger and able-bodied. But when the waters stir, an angel appears and stands in his way.

“Draw back, physician,” the angel says, “this moment is not for you.”

The doctor does not understand. He knows the angel could see the whole truth – that though this man looked OK on the outside, he was a deeply broken and grieving soul.

The angel, however, persists. “Healing is not for you,” he says. “Without your wound where would your power be? It is your very remorse that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men. ... In love’s service, only wounded soldiers can serve.”¹

Years later, the Christian mystic Henri Nouwen would devote one of his most enduring works to this idea. In his book *The Wounded Healer*, Nouwen encourages Christian ministers to understand our individual vulnerabilities and brokenness not as flaws to be eradicated or hindrances to be overcome, but rather as holy spaces for ministry where God’s people might find healing. The work of a Christian servant, Nouwen wrote, “will not be perceived as authentic unless it comes from a heart wounded by the suffering about which he speaks. Thus nothing can be written about ministry without a deeper understanding of the ways in which the minister can make his own wounds available as a

¹ “The Angel That Troubled the Waters.” Wilder, Thornton. *Thornton Wilder: Collected Plays & Writings on Theater* (Library of America, 2007), pages 54–56. Originally published in *The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays* (1928).



source of healing.”² To underscore the gravity of this aspect of our calling, Nouwen went as far as to say that a minister cannot hope to help anyone “without entering his whole person into the painful situation, without taking the risk of becoming hurt, wounded **or even destroyed** in the process.”³

This moment in Mark’s gospel, when Jesus comes back to his hometown and then sends his disciples out into the world two by two, strikes me as one of the clearest examples of Jesus as the ultimate “Wounded Healer.” When we think of our childhood home, there are some things we would like to be able to say about that place. We would like to think that it is the place where we are loved the best – a place where we are not only seen and understood, but loved for who we really are. We would like to say it is also the place that will always be there for us – a home base of safety and security, a true refuge. So, it must have hurt for Jesus to come home and find none of that. Elsewhere, Mark tells us that Jesus was drawing huge crowds and performing amazing miracles. The headline in the town paper should be simple: “Local Boy Makes Good, Comes Home to Joyful Crowd.” Instead, he comes home to side-eyed glances and hurtful cynicism. He even seems to lash out at the response by quoting a well-known secular saying of the day -- “*Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown*” -- and then adding his own personal flourish, noting that the rule even applies to the prophet’s own family and the house of his youth.

And it affected his ability to heal. It is actually pretty jarring for us to read, because it does not seem like something we would ever say about Jesus. “*And he could do no deed of power there,*” Mark writes, “*except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.*” It is one thing to say Jesus chose not to heal, or waited to heal. It is an altogether different thing to say that Jesus **could not** heal – that he did not have the ability. It was not total – he did cure “a few sick people.” But the wounds inflicted on the spirit of Jesus seemed to affect even the Son of God, even in his divine role as a healer and repairer of the brokenness of the world. In these moments, Jesus reveals a very human side of himself – that he could be vulnerable, just as we are vulnerable... that he could be disappointed and hurt, just as we can be disappointed and hurt, even by the people who are supposed to love us the most... and that this kind of pain has an affect our ability to serve others.

As I see it, this vulnerability completely frames and influences what comes next: the first commissioning of the disciples. Up until this point, the twelve have been with Jesus every step of the way. They had been sitting in the shadow of the Master. Now, Jesus is sending them out on their own. In Matthew’s version, the gospel names openly what is clearly implied by Mark – that it will not always be safe and easy out there... that what Jesus is doing is “sending [them] out like sheep into the midst of wolves.”⁴ And while they can take a staff to fend off those wolves, they would not be able to take anything else that gives most people comfort on the road – no food, no money, not even a change of clothes. In the spirit of Tennessee Williams, they would be completely dependent upon the kindness of strangers – for food, shelter, companionship, and support. Here’s the point – the disciples were being sent out into the world in a very vulnerable state. In a world where even Jesus

² Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1972), Loc. 91 of 1257, Kindle.

³ Nouwen, p. 71 of 97 (emphasis added).

⁴ Matthew 10:16.

can be wounded by his own hometown, what might we lesser souls encounter out there, amongst the wolves? This is the reality for all of us who are called to be disciples... those who are called to pick up our own crosses and follow Jesus... those who are called to understand the vulnerabilities of ministry and go out anyway onto the potentially perilous road of Christian witness.

Wilder and Nouwen are not wrong about our qualifications for such ministry. "In love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve." In the end, our witness about the suffering of the world will not be as authentic, or as effective, unless our own hearts have been wounded in the same ways. Those experiences give us greater empathy and understanding of the suffering of others. Stated another way, it gives us greater authority to speak to that suffering. Just think about Dale Williams, Executive Director of the Midnight Run. What makes his story so amazing, and his testimony so powerful is that he knows firsthand what it is like to be lost, rejected by his people, with nowhere to sleep but a park bench. The pain and vulnerability he encountered on the street gives him a unique authority to draw near to those who are still caught in the grips of homelessness. They feel they can trust him, because he understands firsthand the position they are in. The Wounded Healer, the wounded soldier --they are able to bind up the brokenness of the world better than anyone.

But there is another aspect of the "sending out" of the disciples that we cannot and should not miss. Even though Jesus sends the twelve out in an admittedly vulnerable state, they are not left defenseless. First of all, they are sent out in twos. They are not alone. They have the support of another disciple – a wingman (or wing-person) who will stick with them through thick and thin.

They are given special authority. As usual, Mark doesn't give us a lot of words to explain what happened. All we are told is that Jesus "*gave them authority over the unclean spirits.*" It is, for us, largely a mystery, how this was done, and what this really meant. It is clear, however, that what they received from Jesus was power, ability, and control – a mystical energy to perform the same deeds of power they had seen Jesus perform.

And the third gift is what I would call authoritative discretion. One of the vulnerabilities Jesus imposed upon the disciples was the idea that they were not to shop around for the most comfortable places – the softest beds or best food. "*Wherever you enter a house,*" Jesus says, "*stay there until you leave the place.*" So, when they entered a town, whichever house took them in first, that's where they stayed.

But Jesus also said this: "*If anyone will not welcome you or refuses to listen to you... then you can shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.*" Our English translation says any "place," but it is really more general than that. It's more like "anyone." If anyone doesn't respect you... if they are blowing you off or giving you lip service, then you, disciples, can make the call about whether to stay or leave. You do not have to send word back to Jesus to get his OK. Part of the express authority delegated to the disciples was the permission to use their own instincts, their own minds, their own powers of perception, to determine whether the ministry was bearing fruit or not. And if the two of them concluded together that the ministry was not working, they were empowered to make their own call, with God's blessing.

Now I will admit that this is my own interpretation, but what I think Jesus was doing was giving the disciples permission to choose survival. Remember what Nouwen said – if we are called to be wounded healers, then that means we go out into ministry to put our whole person on the line – making ourselves vulnerable in service to others even if we

might get “hurt, wounded *or even destroyed* in the process.” I believe that, at some point, we will all meet our Golgotha – we will all arrive at the hill where we are called to commit ourselves to winning, even if it means our own destruction. But even Jesus says that not every hill is meant to die on. In some cases, perhaps even most cases, we as disciples are empowered to decide how we use our spiritual authority and power. And it can be a very faithful option to “shake off the dust” and choose survival.

The most engaging analysis of the person and identity of Jesus Christ that I have read recently was penned by the late Nancy Eiseland. Born with a painful congenital bone defect, Eiseland went on to become a leading political and spiritual voice for people with disabilities. In her best-known work, *The Disabled God*, she describes two extremes of how we sometimes view Jesus. At one extreme is Christ the Victor, a Savior who reigns victorious, but in a way that seems to eliminate any scars from his earthly passion. This is the Christ with six-pack abs, who many tragically imagine holding an AR-15 in one hand and an American flag in the other. This extreme view of Jesus, Eiseland argued, is clearly repudiated in scripture when the risen Jesus unabashedly presents his wounds to Thomas and the other disciples.⁵ It is a mistake, she says, to deny that Jesus was wounded.

At the other extreme stands the Suffering Servant. Yes, that is a scriptural truth, but in this case the image we tend to pull up is the polar opposite of *Christus Victor*. In the other extreme, we saw the victory but no brokenness. Here we see the brokenness but no victory. This, too, is a gross misunderstanding of who Christ is and what Christ does.

Somehow, Eiseland said, the truth must lie in the middle. Out of her own bodily perspective, from the particular view of her own wheelchair, she saw -- and I am using her words here -- she saw “God in a sip-puff wheelchair... Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant.”⁶ The Christ Eiseland knew was, again to use her words, the “disabled God” -- scathed but not defeated, weathered but not tragic, fully and utterly human, but also fully and miraculously God. “In that moment,” she wrote, “I beheld God as a *survivor*.”⁷

Without our wounds, where would our power be?

In love’s service, only wounded soldiers can serve.

So, out of his own pain, from the life-giving well of his own woundedness, Jesus the Wounded Healer calls his disciples together and sends them out into a world full of wolves. He denies them some of our most basic go-to defenses – extra provisions, money, and clothes to fend off the cold and the rain. But he also empowers them. He gives them partners in ministry. He gives them power and authority that comes directly from heaven. And he gives them trust – trust in their ability to decide when, where, and how they will commit themselves to the gospel. And since that day every true disciple of Christ has come to share, out there on the road, the blessed experience of Paul, who himself was “*afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.*”⁸ We, like them, are called to be Healing Survivors.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

⁵ Nancy L. Eiseland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 100.

⁶ *Id.* at 89.

⁷ *Id.* (*emphasis added*).

⁸ 2 Corinthians 4:7-9.