

Healing (*Searching for Sunday*) – 1 Kings 17:8-20 (21-24) and James 5:13-18

Many years ago, I applied to be part of the studio audience for Andrew Denton's *Enough Rope* programme. Do some of you remember *Enough Rope*? And part of the application was an optional questionnaire with the question, "*What is the hardest thing you have to do as part of your job?*"

Thankfully the footage from episode has now disappeared (and only two people ever watched it – me and the chair of the diaconate when I applied for this job! Thanks, Bruce!) but what made it to air wasn't my answer to that question, but Aron (who hadn't even bothered to do the questionnaire!) telling Andrew about how we got together...*how it was at a moonlit protest gathering, how our eyes met across the barbed wire, how devastating I looked in handcuffs.*

Obviously that story was embellished! But the *Enough Rope* producers clearly thought it was 'better television' than me trying to articulate to Andrew that the hardest thing I do in my job is being present in the hardest times in other people's lives, embodying the church's slow and difficult work of healing.

Front of mind for me at the time, was a young couple in our church, who had taken themselves to emergency straight after church because the husband had a severe headache. And a few hours later they'd been told it was a tumour, that surgery was required, that it would also remove part of his brain, and that recovery was uncertain and would only really buy them time.

And I'd sat with them that night in the hospital, the surgery scheduled for the morning, and I'd prayed – the only prayer I could pray – that he would come through this, that it would go well and he would be restored to his wife. "*Do you really think,*" they said, "*Do you really think that could happen?*"

And I didn't know what to say – because there are many times in life when we don't know what to say. All we can do, as Rachel Held Evans says in this section on 'anointing the sick' in *Searching for Sunday*, is "*to enter into one another's pain, anoint it as holy, and stick around no matter the outcome.*"

She tells the story of a couple who were heavily committed to their local church, but when they lost a child, they found that their church and their pastor weren't willing to enter into the pain of this with them. Their agony was met largely by "*Bible verses, theological answers, promises of better days ahead*" and it was only outside the church where they found people who were willing to talk honestly about faith and doubt and grief.

Sadly, they are not alone in this experience. I have had friends who could tell that exact story, and I am sure you have too. Friends who fit very comfortably into their churches – into this church perhaps – until the divorce or diagnosis

or miscarriage or the depression or they came out as gay or they asked too many questions, or they spoke uncomfortable truths out loud.

And then what churches often do is try to fix things, to explain things away, to quietly shut things down. *"With good intentions tinged with fear,"* Evans writes, *"Christians scour their inventory for a cure."*

"But," she goes on... *"The thing about healing, as opposed to curing, is that it is relational. It takes time. It is inefficient, like a meandering river. Rarely does healing follow a straight or well-lit path. Rarely does it confirm to our expectations or resolve in a timely manner. Walking with someone through grief, or through the process of reconciliation, requires patience, presence, and a willingness to wander, to take the scenic route."*

American academic, author and presenter, Brené Brown, puts it, *"I went to church thinking it would be like an epidural, that it would take the pain away... But church isn't like an epidural; it's like a midwife... I thought faith would say, 'I'll take away the pain and discomfort, but what it ended up saying was, 'I'll sit with you in it.'"*

The traditional practice of anointing the sick with oil, regarded as a sacrament in many churches, is not intended to be a miracle cure, but a sign of the ways we are intended to minister to one another.

If we are suffering, James 5: 13, we can minister to the church through prayer. If we are joyful, we can minister to the church through praise. If we are sick, we can minister to others by calling on them to minister to us. We have no idea, the writer of James says, of the healing power we have when we minister to one another. And goes on to give the example, from the Hebrew Scriptures, of the prophet Elijah who *"was a human being like us"* and yet prayed such powerful prayers he stopped the rain for three years and six months and then brought it back again.

But arguably it is what happens between those two weather events that is even more amazing, the story we read this morning.

The story of the period of the drought is full of miracles, ravens bringing Elijah food morning and evening when he camps by the Wadi Cherith, a jar of meal (or flour) and a jug of oil that do not run out and a child brought back from death or from the brink of death, but what is equally amazing – and arguably equally miraculous in the difficult world of human relations - is this relationship between an Israeli prophet and the widow of Zarephath.

God tells Elijah to go all the way from east of the Jordan River to Zarephath, an ancient town south of Sidon in Lebanon, to meet a widow, one of the most vulnerable of the vulnerable in the ancient world, one who we know is especially vulnerable in this moment. She, in turn, is confronted by a man

from Israel, a man connected with Israel's violent tyrant of a king, Ahab, and a foreign God. "As the Lord your God lives," she says, "I have nothing...only a handful of meal...and a little oil," and yet, when Elijah requests it, she gives him part of the little remaining food that they have.

The miracle is the relationship that must build, the healing that must take place, day by day here as these two trust one another, as they trust God's promise "that the jar of meal...and the jug of oil will not fail..." And then, as they trust, when tragedy strikes, and the widow's son falls severely ill.

We read this story at morning prayers a few weeks ago and two things really struck me.

First, the incredible strength of this woman. Holding her dying child to her chest, she confronts Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God?" And then, even more incredible, when Elijah asks, she is prepared to hand her son to him.

But also, we read here the incredible response of Elijah. We didn't read past verse 20 because, at morning prayers, we thought verse 21, with today's sensibilities, sounds a little creepy, "*Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried out to the Lord, 'O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again.'*" But several things are happening here. It could be a form of resuscitation. But more importantly, touching dead bodies made you ritually impure and here is Elijah completely risking himself in his identification with this foreign widows' child. And three times is the number of completion.

This story of healing is a story of being willing to enter into one another's pain, as Evans says, of anointing what we might think profane as holy, and of sticking with it no matter what the outcome. She goes on, "*The church offers the messy, inconvenient, gut-wrenching, never-ending work of healing and reconciliation. The church offers grace. Anything else we try to peddle is snake oil. It's not the real thing.*"

It strikes me as particularly poignant that we are reading this story and thinking about what it offers us as Zarephath, between Tyre and Sidon, lies just south of the Zahrani Rover, the line which Israel has told Lebanese people they must evacuate beyond. How can we hold that situation close, how can we anoint it as holy and stick with the slow and difficult work of healing?

Even more years ago, when I was part of the Woolloomooloo Baptist Fellowship in Sydney, a member of our community preached and said – working from a similar text to this – that he did not believe, there in the inner city of Sydney, that we would see the dead raised or blind people regaining their sight or those in wheelchairs suddenly walking. "*But the signs of God's kingdom gaining ground I have seen and heard*, he said, "*Prostitutes and drug*

addicts and drunks have found friends, the homeless share what they have with others, people who've always had jobs and people who've never had jobs work and worship together, people with mental illness feel safe, those who were excluded are included, and the poor have good news brought to them."

At the end of this chapter, Evans says, people sometimes ask her if she believes in faith healings.

"I don't know," she says, "I've watched too many people of strong faith succumb to illness and tragedy to believe God shows any sort of favouritism in these matters. "And yet, inexplicably, I always pray.)"

She goes on to say she tells them about all the slow and difficult and beautiful works of healing that she has seen in the church. She tells them about her own journey *"away from and back to church."* And she shrugs her shoulders and says, "I suppose anything's possible."

Let's pray.

Prayer after message

God of the Widow at Zarephath, God of Elijah,
we stand in awe of people who show hospitality
in the midst of sacrifice and betrayal.
Take us deep into the heart of healing and grace this morning.
Help us to understand these things that the world needs
often demands sacrifice on our part.
Be with those who have never known a table
blessed by laughter and welcome,
Remind us, O God, that we are to set many tables,
to speak blessings often
and to be your love in the world.
In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

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