



## Healing Luke 8:40-56

### Preparation

You may wish to read the commentary on the passage that follows the initial set of discussion questions and summarize the high-points for the class. You may wish to prepare a worship/reflection space with a painting, sculpture, or photo of a strong woman or laughing children or a family gathering or community meal. You might also want to spread around things that remind you of health and well-being or medical care.

### Open with the following prayer or a prayer of your own choosing.

*O God who rescues slaves  
and sets them free,  
who feeds the hungry  
in their wilderness,  
who heals the sick  
and binds up the broken-hearted,  
help us trust you.  
Free us from the chains  
of fear,  
lead us into the freedom  
of bold courage.  
Feed us with the wisdom of heaven.  
Heal us by your patient love.  
Help us trust you today.  
Show us your truth.  
Amen*



### Read Luke 8:40-56

### Discuss the following questions:

Where was Jesus going when the woman touched the “hem” or “fringe” of Jesus’s garment?

How old was the sick girl? How long had the woman who touched the fringe of Jesus’s garment been hemorrhaging? Why do you think the gospel includes those details?

How did Jesus know that the woman had touched him? What do you make of his answer to Peter? What does he mean?

What does Jesus say caused the woman to be healed?

There are only a few direct quotes from Jesus in this double story. Read each direct quote aloud, one after the other. What are the things Jesus seems to be emphasizing in these quotes?

You can't tell it from most English translations, but the Greek words in verse 48 ("your faith has made you well") and verse 50 ("only believe and she will be healed") are from the same roots. In Greek, verse 50 is pointing explicitly back to verse 48. What do you make of that?

What does Jesus say about the dead girl when he arrives at Jairus's house? What do you make of that?

What do you make of the fact that these two stories are paired with each other?

What's the message of these stories for us today?

### **Read or have someone summarize the following commentary and discuss the questions that follow:**

This is a story within a story. The larger narrative, within which today's story is embedded, relates to the 12-year-old daughter of a synagogue leader named Jairus. She is very ill, so Jairus comes to ask Jesus to heal her. Jesus is on his way to Jairus's home when a woman with a 12-year-long hemorrhage works her way through the crowd that surrounded Jesus and touches a fringe on his garment. She is immediately healed. Jesus asks who touched him. Peter, who is traveling with Jesus, points out the obvious: you're in the middle of a big crowd of people who are all touching you! What do you mean, "who touched me?" Jesus clarifies: "I know that power went out from me." The woman, realizing she couldn't just melt into the crowd, as apparently she had planned to do, comes trembling and falls prostrate before Jesus. She tells her story to the crowd, and Jesus says, "Daughter, your faith (or trust) has healed (or saved or rescued) you. Go in peace!" Immediately after that, a messenger arrives to tell Jairus that his daughter has died. Jesus tells the devout man not to fear: "Just trust (or have faith), and she will be healed (or saved or rescued)." Jesus continues to the house and tells people not to cry. "She's not dead. She's just sleeping." Though grieved, they laugh, because "they knew she was dead." Jesus takes the hand of the girl and says, "get up, child!" Her breathing starts again, and she gets up. The parents are utterly astounded, and Jesus orders them not to tell anybody about what just happened.

The combination of the two stories sets up a number of interesting links that allow the stories to mutually interpret one another. It hardly seems a coincidence, for example, that the girl is 12 years old and the woman has had vaginal bleeding for just that many years. She has had this disorder for as long as the girl has been alive. The fact that the girl is 12 may also be significant, since puberty typically began for girls around that age or slightly later. So the girl may have not yet had first menstruation. The girl and the woman are linked but, in some ways, as mirror opposites. The woman reaches out with her hand and touches a fringe on Jesus's garment, but Jesus reaches out and touches the hand of the girl. The trembling woman "falls down" before Jesus. The death-stilled girl "gets up" at his command. In both stories, "faith" or, better, "trust" (*pistis* in Greek) lies at the heart of things. It is the woman's "trust," Jesus says, that has healed (or rescued) her. The very next thing he says is to the girl's father: "Don't be afraid. Just trust and she will be healed (rescued)." So in multiple ways, the woman's bold act functions as a model for the frightened and grieving family of the critically ill girl. If indeed the prepubescence of the girl is part of the underlying logic of the narrative complex, we have a situation where the "faith/trust" of the perpetually "unsanitary" woman both "rescues" her from her potentially life-threatening ailment and serves as an example for the parents of the girl who appears to have died before she reached puberty.

To understand this story properly, it's important to be clear about the distinction between "uncleanliness" and "sin." Any number of things were considered unsanitary or "unclean." Touching a corpse, for example, made you unclean. You needed to do the ritual version of washing your hands or using hand sanitizer to clean up. This often involved a set period of time, sacrifices, and/or ritual bathing. The person who, for whatever reason, was unsanitary was not necessarily ostracized, though there might be certain things they couldn't do until they cleaned up and some unclean people certainly were ostracized.



Priests, for example, couldn't perform temple rituals -- any more than a surgeon should start surgery without a thorough scrub. Certain diseases, especially those that caused leakage of bodily fluids, put you in an unsanitary state as long as you had the disease. This didn't necessarily mean that you were shunned or considered "sinful." But it did mean that you had to clean up before you did certain things, and you were cut off from certain social interactions, particularly those that involved intimacy or close contact with others. Women were considered unsanitary for a period of time after child-birth and during and after their menstrual period. So the woman who touched the fringe of Jesus's garment, in addition to the physical weakness that no doubt resulted from incessant blood loss, had been "unsanitary" for a very long time.

As if that weren't enough, she had exhausted her financial resources going to healers in a fruitless search for a cure. She was "unclean," limited in her social interactions, especially with men, and the cost of health care had left her broke. No doubt in desperation, she came up behind Jesus and touched a fringe of his garment.

"Fringe" (*kraspedon* in Greek) refers to one of the blue and white wool tassels Jesus and other Jews wore at the four corners of the outer garment as a reminder that they should always walk according to the commandments of Torah (see Num 15:37-41 and Deut 22:12 for the meaning of the tassel, *tsitsit* in Hebrew -- pronounced *tsee-tseet*). Normally, the fringes hang fairly low. So the woman perhaps was bent over or even on hands and knees when she reached out to touch the garment.

This suggests that she was deliberately reaching for the tassel, not just randomly reaching out to grab some part of Jesus's clothing. The Numbers passage says the tassels are meant to be a visual reminder to obey all the commandments of God and not to "prostitute yourselves" by chasing after whatever your mind desires and your eyes see (15:39). The woman is reaching out to touch the symbol of Jesus's own commitment to Torah, his loyalty to God. She trusts Jesus's trust in God, his loyalty to the way of life God's Torah outlines. And her loyalty, her trust, Jesus says, is what healed her.

The word that I've been translating as "trust" or "loyalty" is the Greek word *pistis*, a word that typically is translated "faith" or even "belief." It certainly means something like "faithfulness" to something or someone. But "faith," in our context, is too often associated with "belief," especially

belief in or assent to a set of propositions, a creedal affirmation. That's a misreading of the Greek. *Pistis* is a covenantal term. It has to do with loyalty, faithfulness to a relationship. It means having confidence, trusting that the one you're in a relationship with will be faithful to the relationship. It also means that you are acting in a trustworthy manner yourself. It's not that "belief" plays no part, but *pistis* is a much more weighty term than "belief." It's belief in the sense that a spouse might say to his partner or a parent might say to her child, "I believe in you!" It means, "I have confidence in you! I'll be there for you! I'd trust my life to you! I give my all to you! I would give my life for you!" *Pistis* is not a creedal affirmation. It's "all in!" I'm all in for you, because I know you're all in for me.

This desperate woman, economically destitute because her health care costs had bankrupted her, was all in for Jesus, who she realized was all in for God. Her faith, her confidence, her trust in the trustworthiness of Jesus "saved" her, "rescued" her, "healed" her of the life-threatening and quality-of-life-threatening condition that had weakened her body and made her permanently "dirty," cut off from intimate companionship and love.

The Greek word that we normally translate as "heal" actually carries a range of meaning. It basically means to rescue from danger and restore to a former state of safety. In the context of an illness or injury, it means to restore health. Remember that "salvation" is related to the word *salve*. They're both from the Latin root, *salvare*, "to save" or "to pay the price" to liberate something (or someone) from the grip of another, as in to rescue or redeem someone from slavery. "Your trust has liberated you, has rescued you, has healed you."

The New Testament scholar John Pilch has written extensively on healing in the ancient Mediterranean world, in the New Testament in particular. The following points are from a very helpful online summary<sup>1</sup> of his more extensive book-length discussions of the topic.<sup>2</sup> Using insights from the field of medical anthropology, Pilch makes several important observations that we should keep in mind as we read this story. To begin with, we need to understand that healing in



One of the most effective healing ministries we and our Congolese partners support is the provision of treated mosquito nets for beds. The World Health Organization estimates that about 660,000 people die each year of malaria in Africa. Most of those are children. The Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria account for over 40% of malaria deaths globally. Prevention has reduced cases in Africa by 33% since 2000.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.baylor.edu/christianethics/HealthArticlePilch.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> John J. Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000); *Visions and Healing in the Acts of the Apostles: How the Early Believers Experienced God* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004).

the biblical world is very different than modern medicine. The truth of the matter is that we don't really know whether the conditions described in the Bible -- blind, lame, leprous, etc. -- describe the same physical realities we have in mind when we see those words today. Medical anthropology makes a number of distinctions we should also keep in mind. "Well-being" describes the human experience of things going well in our lives. Various things can disrupt our well-being, including problems with our health. A health problem that disrupts our well-being is called a "sickness." Sickness is a physical reality that can be analyzed and explained two different ways: as "disease" and as "illness." "Disease" describes the sickness by our current biomedical theories. We try to diagnose it, look for its physical cause, and figure out a "cure," removing its cause and arresting or ending its further development. "Illness," as medical anthropologists use the term, interprets the sickness within its social-cultural context. An "illness" causes the one who experiences it to lose a sense of meaning in life. "Healing" addresses "illness." It restores a sense of meaning to the one who suffers the illness, whether or not the physical condition is changed.

As Pilch observes, "cures" of serious diseases and conditions are rare, even with the advanced medical techniques we have today. "Healing," however, can occur "if the person wants to be healed." Sickness may be so disruptive that we lose a sense that life has meaning. The key to healing is finding a new sense of meaning whatever our physical condition. Folk healers in the ancient world -- and the gospel portrayals of Jesus exactly fit the definition of "folk healer" in medical anthropology -- mediated the power of God or other supernatural beings to restore people to a sense of well-being, to help them find meaning in life again, to liberate them from despair and restore them to the communal life of their families and neighborhoods.

In the case of the people Jesus is said to heal, the primary problem is the loss of meaning caused by separation from the community, often due to issues of sanitation. That's certainly the case in our story-within-a-story. The girl has become a corpse, unclean and, of course, no longer able to be part of her family. The woman is perpetually unclean and therefore limited in her options for social engagement and intimacy. The healing that comes from God through Jesus -- from the woman touching the fringe on his outer garment and from Jesus touching the hand of the lifeless girl -- restores both to full life in the community. We can't be certain about their physical condition before or after their encounters with Jesus. The girl's family "knew" she was dead, but Jesus said "she is only sleeping." Who knows? But the text is clear that both the woman and the girl are immediately healed. And in the exemplary case of the woman, it is her *pistis*, her trust, her confidence, her faith that liberates her and offers a model for the grieving father of the little girl: "Don't be afraid. Just trust (*pisteuson*, a verbal form of *pistis*), and she will be saved (rescued, liberated, healed).

Finally, it's important to notice a small detail of the narrative that reveals a hugely important point about the ministry of Jesus. The woman, we're told, has spent everything she has in a vain attempt to find healing. Now, her trust in Jesus -- in his trusting faithfulness to God's way of life -- has restored her to well-being, to community, to meaningful life. Her trust has healed her and set her free. And Jesus didn't charge her a dime! Like the holy man and healer Elisha (2 Kgs 5:16) Jesus offers healing free of charge, an unusual policy for folk healers in the ancient world.

In the community of Jesus, healing is free. Restored community and meaningful life is the gracious gift of a gracious, healing God, offered freely through a community of broken people who, by the grace of God and their trust in the power of Jesus, are themselves being healed.

## Healing and community in Congo

The Community of the Disciples of Christ in Congo is a founding member of the united Protestant church, the Eglise du Christ au Congo (ECC). Disciples and UCC Global Ministries has had a relationship with ECC from the beginning and has provided funding for a variety of health and educational projects through the years.

In recent years, ECC's Department of Women and the Family has had a particular emphasis on support for survivors of war-related rape in the eastern provinces of Congo. The six-year civil war that has led to the death of approximately 6 million Congolese, mostly civilians, has officially ended, but the environmental, economic, medical, and social repercussions of the war continue. One of the most devastating and lingering consequences of the massive violence is the widespread violent rape of women and girls. This has happened throughout the country, but is particularly pronounced in the eastern provinces. While some cases of rape are reported, the vast

majority are not. Regardless, those who have been attacked face the risk of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and, of course, face the physical, economic, and emotional consequences of undesired pregnancies, which can be particularly dangerous for young teenage girls. The physical consequences are particularly brutal for the large number of girls between the ages of four and twelve who are being assaulted. Their physical recovery is often slow and painful. Some of their injuries cannot be repaired. Their psychological and spiritual injuries are severe, often made much worse because they are rejected by their husbands, families, and villages for bringing "shame" by being raped. Cut off from family and village support, they and their children are economically devastated.

Our church partners in Congo are providing some medical care and spiritual, psychological, and economic support to rape survivors and orphans, but resources are scarce and the scope of the problem is staggering. ECC's Department of Women and the Family is training people to provide psychological, economic, and spiritual support for the traumatized. They are offering education, vocational training, and economic assistance to rape survivors and are working to reintegrate them into communities of support. They hope to be able to provide revolving credit to women for a period of four months after the counseling process has ended. Limited funds have limited the scope of the program, but it's underway in one eastern province and, as funds become available, will be expanded.

The physical, economic, emotional, and spiritual injuries sustained by these courageous, determined survivors may never be "cured," but their trust, their confidence, their faith is healing them, restoring them, making them whole.



ECC vehicle for health and education ministries and pastoral care provided by a Global Ministries grant.

May our faithfulness to the faithful witness and power of Jesus join with our faithful sisters and brothers in Congo to bring healing to ever more survivors. To donate, click [here](#) or go to [donate.globalministries.org/online giving](http://donate.globalministries.org/online-giving).

**If you have time, discuss the following questions:**

How, if at all, are the survivors in Congo like the characters in the gospel story?

What would it mean for these women and girls to be “healed”?

How can their faith/trust/confidence bring them healing?

What role should our faith/trust/confidence have in their healing?

What should we do?

**Close with the following prayer or one of your own choosing:**

*O God who heals the sick,  
and binds up the broken-hearted,  
who tends to the wounds  
we see  
and the wounds so deep  
we can only sense  
at the numbed edges  
of our conscious minds.  
O God  
who screams with outrage  
at the violence  
done by small, greedy, heartless people;  
O God of light,  
shine the power of truth  
on the evil deeds  
of the violent.  
Give us the courage to stop them  
from the damage they do,  
the compassion to tend the wounds  
of the people they hurt.  
O Great Justice,  
Fire of Heaven,  
Champion of the violated,  
Healer of the injured,  
Hope of all who have known despair,  
rain down justice!  
Help us end the violence!  
Help us heal the broken!  
You are our salve  
and our salvation!  
Help us trust you.*

Free us from the chains  
of fear.  
Help us trust you,  
that the shamed and shunned may be restored,  
that the injured and sick may be made whole.  
Increase our faithfulness  
that the world may be healed.  
By the power and in the name  
of the Great Healer,  
Jesus.  
Amen

**For the complete bible study series please visit**  
**[www.globalministries.org/congo-initiative/biblestudies.html](http://www.globalministries.org/congo-initiative/biblestudies.html)**.