

The healing after the calling Epiphany 3A (Matthew 4:12-23)

Why do we give Matthew 4:23 short shrift?

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After Jesus has called Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John, the Gospel reading determined by the lectionary includes this verse: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people."

After the call story of the first disciples, this information feels like just an intermission or a stage direction before the story continues with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

All of that proclaiming and healing and curing garnered Jesus quite a following, and rightfully so. It's not that flashy, though, at least not in this snippet of the telling. The story of calling the disciples is vivid, easy to preach, and it invites us to imagine the kind of instant reaction that the guys displayed. It leaves us shaking our heads in wonderment, and I don't wonder if in the midst of that wonderment, we tend to gloss over this verse of truth about Jesus' next moves: teaching, proclaiming, and curing *every disease and every sickness*.

But the more that I think about why I give this verse short shrift, I wonder if it's less that I'm caught up in the glory of the disciples' call story, and more that I don't really know what to do with this aspect of Jesus. The next verse that isn't included in the lectionary (go ahead and read it in worship, though) outlines the vast array of those who came to him for healing: all the sick, pained and diseased, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics. And I'd like this Jesus to visit our communities today—to

tour our hospitals, our institutions that are sick with systemic racism, our families deeply divided. If I can preach that Jesus is still calling us to be disciples today (and I can and have preached that), why can't I embrace the idea that Jesus still brings healing to those in need?

When I wrestle with that question, I face the reality that our loved ones get sick and die. There are incurable diseases. The divisions in our families and our country will be long in the healing, if they ever do find reconciliation. And honestly, this was true in the first century, too. In the same way that discipleship in the 21st century looks different on the surface, so might healing. Already in the church in Corinth there were divisions and quarrels, and Paul was urging the people to be united in the name of Jesus.

Now I don't believe that a community united in Jesus would have stopped the progression of cancer through my mom's body. And I never believed that we could pray away her disease. She had congregations far and wide holding her in prayer, and those prayers brought healing and comfort to our lives—but not to her body, not in this world.

This isn't the first or only time that I've struggled with these questions, and I doubt that it is for you. Most likely it won't be the last time we struggle either, because there aren't really answers—at least not good ones. These quandaries end up being the mysteries of faith, and perhaps we are united not because of our answers but because of our continued attention to the questions and the assurance that we are called to follow in the way of Jesus, not to *be* Jesus.