

Healing From the Ground Up

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Luke 13:10-17b

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The biblical story came alive for me this week. I spent some time with a woman on Tuesday who is bent double by life and has been for a long, long time. She's endured suffering (and abuse) in her home country in Central America and now, is seeking asylum here. She is being monitored by U.S. Immigration and her suffering continues. Her name is Alma and she is a friend of our church.¹

We'd just come from the Immigration office called ISAP (Intensive Supervision Appearance Program) in Hartford that places GPS ankle shackles on undocumented people being followed by ICE. Alma's was not working properly and causing swelling as well as terrible distress. The device had broken numerous times and she'd been subjected to harassment calls in the middle of the night for weeks. Three times in July she returned to the office for replacements and was accused of breaking it. Unfortunately, on this occasion, rather than taking off the ankle shackle for good as we'd hoped, a new, larger one was fitted to her opposite ankle.

After leaving Hartford, we drove to meet up with a medical professional who would assess Alma's discomfort and make sure she was okay. The young woman was now bent over and limping as she walked. Her movements labored, tears flowed down into her face mask. It had been a grueling morning.

When I walked into the room to join her, the physician's assistant was already on the ground sitting at Alma's feet looking up at her. Alma sat hunched over in a chair. The PA gently palpated Alma's swollen ankle and rubbed the tops of her feet. While she touched the young mother, she asked questions in a soft and gentle voice, "como esta?" gazing into her eyes, calling her by name, and speaking her language in loving tones. The PA exuded such compassion the energy in Alma's whole body - and the room-changed.

Alma breathed more easily. Her shoulders dropped. Mine did too.

Healing was visible in that moment, You could SEE it. Alma even sat up straighter. Afterwards, she and her sister left arm in arm. More energy for the road ahead I prayed ...

After the medical examination, Alma's wounds were still deep, her sorrow still apparent, the ongoing trauma and humiliation she'd been facing at the hands of ICE officials as she filed her claims for asylum... remained oppressive.

¹ Alma's name has been changed for confidentiality.

Much more had to happen for Alma to be truly free. Her ankle was still shackled, her case in limbo.

And yet, in this moment. Dignity had been restored. Alma's humanity had been returned to her in a new way.

And, with our continued support as a church, hopefully, Alma's life and future will change for the better as well. Stay tuned for more on our communal efforts towards that.

What I witnessed as I accompanied Alma, was a glimmer into today's gospel narrative. Into what healing is made of. Even healing in the midst of oppression, in the midst of division as it is depicted in the biblical story.

In the gospel, compassion and relationship overtake any arbitrary (inhumane) human-made rules.

In scripture, we find many encounters of Jesus healing. Sometimes Jesus touches someone, sometimes he calls them by name, sometimes, Jesus is touched by another and "feels the strength go out of him (Luke 8:46)." While the particular details of the scenes may differ, the healing message is often the same.

In Luke's text, Jesus calls the woman over, speaks to her and then, places his hands upon her in some life-giving way that leads to her restoration. She responds by standing up straight for the first time in nearly two decades looking at him and the world face to face. Healing has no timeline.

This "daughter of Abraham" who went to pray in her place of worship, was seen for her true self and thus, went from bent over to straight. Bound to free. Moving beyond the limits she'd been confined to up until this healing moment with Jesus.

We can see in this short story God's purposes to heal, liberate, and unbind. This human being steps into her new life, is now able to see what and who Jesus sees – who needs to be helped. Who is in pain. Those who are bent over with the weight of a world that continues not to care.

Hopefully now, face toward the sun, this heir of Abraham and Sarah is able to live into the new chapter of her life as the community rejoices around with her.

Nothing in the gospels happens in isolation. Just as in our lives, even during a pandemic and a major Tropical Storm, who we are as a community comes to light.

The challenges of our recent experience with powerlessness over events and diagnoses and the unexpected losses can render us so vulnerable ... With happenings out of our control, feelings of displacement and despair can leave us bent double by it all.

The good news of our faith seems to be most relevant at times like these. Where healing hands bring life home to us once again. You are not alone. I am not alone. Alma is not alone.

The poet Rilke says this:

“Nearby is a country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness.

Take my hand.”

Small and large gestures matter in the healing work we are called to do as church.

Kind words spoken over the phone.

A fresh cup of coffee made for a bereft friend.

A tuna sandwich shared over an impromptu lunch.

A shower and shampoo offered at a neighbor’s house while your water and power are still out.

A text from a colleague checking in to see how you’re doing in the dark.

A drive with a friend to her ICE and medical appointments.

What is the healing work we are called to as a community of faith? As a people charged with joining in the building of the beloved community.

Theologically speaking, we are a healing church. I think ultimately the ministries and missions we devote our time and generosity to at FCCOL is the work of healing in the world – and witnessing to that action in each other’s lives.

Walter Bruggemann, theologian and author, wrote that “what God does first and best and most is to trust people with their moment in history. God trusts them to do what must be done for the sake of the whole community.”

I would even go on to say that as a church, healing is our spiritual practice. Healing through the seasons of one another’s lives together.

Healing person by person and partnership by partnership. Healing in good company. Fostering healing relationships that can lift beyond an oppressive situation or protest systematic oppression of our fellow human beings.

How do we practice healing? I'm not talking the mumbo jumbo kind. Or the literalist interpretation of Jesus' healing stories (as some in circles of Christianity fall prey to). Notions of healing that lead people to think that they aren't "good enough" or "worthy enough" or haven't prayed enough" to be free of their ailment or shackles, disease or worse.

So, what knocks you over and what helps you stand tall?

It is those shared stories, too, alongside discussions about our responsibilities to dismantle racism and exclusion that make our church a home for many.

We also should not be surprised if entering into that healing work leads us further into confrontation as it has at times already.

That's a core part of this gospel story, too.

The active practice of love and healing sometimes leads to trouble (*good trouble*) according to the late Senator John Lewis.

Perhaps the healing work also means seeing the whole of the story, the suffering person and those walking tall again, Jesus, the crowd in the synagogue and the community praising together. Rather than too quickly siding with one camp over the other, perhaps we could widen our gaze and see with the eyes of God. Perhaps that's when the real healing can begin for those stooped to the ground.

When I walked Alma and her sister to their car after the medical appointment, I noticed Alma wore the necklace I gave her last year when we first met. I'd purchased it in the West Bank on one of our partnership journeys to Palestine and Israel. It was a wooden Banksy cut-out, made from the image this graffiti artist had painted of a child holding balloons and floating up and over the cement wall (Banksy painted it on the towering, inhumane cement wall dividing up the West Bank). Alma tells me she hasn't taken it off since she received it.

A sign for her of the hope of things to come and of a church community that cares for her healing and freedom along the way.

Amen.

