

# Faith Healing 101

Pentecost 20 – Year C

October 10, 2010

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 ✕ Psalm 66:1-12 ✕ 2 Timothy 2:8-15 ✕ Luke 17:11-19

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*Then we had a prayer.  
The same kind of prayer  
that I had heard Oral  
Roberts deliver hundreds  
and hundreds of times.  
But this time – his  
hands were on me.*

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Let us pray: We the ten lepers with scars and wounds long for your healing touch. From our deepest depths we cry to you, "Jesus, Master! Have compassion on us!" A Samaritan threw himself at your feet. We throw ourselves into your love. Heal us, Jesus. Make us whole.<sup>1</sup> Amen.

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## *Faith Healing 101.*

That's what it felt like I had stepped into upon my arrival as a student at Oral Roberts University. When I arrived at the ORU campus in the fall of 1973, I didn't really know anything about Oral Roberts. My family didn't particularly watch Oral's shows on television. Our community of faith at the First Christian Church was not charismatic. What I *did know*, was that I had a full scholarship to work as an athletic trainer for a basketball program that

was ranked in the Top Ten of the NCAA Division I schools.

It didn't take long for my education to begin. By the end of my freshman year in college, I was both Oral's physical therapist and his massage therapist. About every other month, Oral's ministry would host a weekend gathering of his followers on campus. There would be a series of preaching and musical events, ending with a healing service on Sunday morning. By the time Sunday afternoon of those weekends rolled around, Oral would be wiped out.

After those several intense days of preaching, and a full morning spent engaging perhaps a thousand people one-on-one, Oral would be exhausted. I would arrive up at his and Evelyn's home with my portable ultra-sound

machine. Looking back on it all, I can't believe that an eighteen-year-old was let loose on Oral Roberts, with an ultra-sound machine and a couple of bottles of lotion!

But there I was, giving Oral Roberts an ultra-sound treatment, and massaging his shoulders and neck for about an hour. We'd sit at the kitchen table, where Oral would tell me stories – usually funny – “about the old days” in the revival tents, while Evelyn would fix us tuna fish salad sandwiches: toasted white wonder bread, with one piece of lettuce.

Even as young as I was at the time, it seemed like an odd thing. Oral would have just spent hours and hours praying that God would heal people with all kinds of ailments and pains, and then, there he and I would be, setting in his own kitchen, with me trying to work the kinks out of his own tired neck and shoulder.

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We have an interesting story from Luke's gospel today. It's built around an episode of healing, but I'm not sure that in this case, Luke only goal was to preserve in his gospel a story about God's power to heal.

*On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”*

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We should really do our best to *not* talk about “the lepers.” It isn't a good thing to describe people in the context of their particular ailment. When we use words like ‘the lepers’ or ‘the crippled’ or ‘the blind’ we are getting dangerously close to a posture of creating outsiders.

Of course, that is exactly what the society and Levitical code of the ancient Hebrew people did. Boundaries were created. The pure – that would be “us” – are inside. The unclean – that would be “them” – are outside.

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People with leprosy were definitely “outside.” As Luke tells his story, when the people afflicted with leprosy saw Jesus, they held back. That was what both their society and their religion required of them.

Yet upon seeing Jesus, they cried out. And just what did they ask of Jesus? This brings us to the point of the story.

It's not a only story about healing. Did they ask Jesus for treatment? Did they ask Jesus for healing?

They asked Jesus for mercy.

Pity is another English word used by some translations. Another possible translation – I think the best translation – is the word *compassion*. *Jesus, Master, have compassion on us!*

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Walter Brueggemann, a theologian and Hebrew Scripture scholar points to this expression of compassion by Jesus as “*a radical form of criticism*.”<sup>ii</sup> Nora Gallagher, a significant voice in the current dialogue about faith in this country, “unpacks” Brueggemann's thesis like this:

*Jesus in his compassion says that the affliction of this person with leprosy, their pain, their disease, and their marginalization, are to be taken seriously, and are not to be accepted as normal. It is not normal for people to be without food; it is not normal for someone who has leprosy or someone*

*who cannot see or cannot hear to have to beg on the street.*

*Their pain, their confusion, the way they might be outcast in this society, are to be taken seriously.*

*Being forced to the margins of life is not to be accepted as normal.<sup>iii</sup>*

A radical form of criticism. That is at least one of the things that this story from Luke is about. And it gets even more radical.

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All ten are told by Jesus to go and show themselves to the priests – and along the way we are told, they are healed. No magic words. No spitting in the dust to make mud. No anointing with oil. No mid-week healing service at the local Episcopal church. And no television ministry asking you to put your hands on the TV set, or to send \$5 to Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Just take yourselves to Temple, and show yourselves to the priests. So off they go, on ahead of Jesus, towards Jerusalem – and one of them turns back.

This story is also often stylized as a message about gratitude. The one person with leprosy who turns back to thank Jesus is held up – as at least an example of good manners, if not great faith. But I don't think this is a message about good manners.

As the crowd of folk took off down the road to Jerusalem, this one fellow had to stop. He was 'the outcast of the outcasts' – a Samaritan.

When we've reflected on the story from Luke's gospel that we typically call "The Good Samaritan" we considered world view of *Odium theologicum* – that particular and peculiar brand of hatred that we can experience towards other people, based on their religion.

The Hebrew people in ancient times *hated* the Samaritans- and visa versa.

It is one thing for Luke to build a story about compassion that is hidden, in and around, a story about healing. But it is a stroke of literary and theological genius – or perhaps the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, depending upon your understanding of the genesis of scripture – for Luke to cast the pivotal character as a Samaritan.

It's one thing to use a Samaritan as example of knowing how to love your neighbor.

It is all together a different thing to use a Samaritan as an example of how to love God.

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There are enough challenges in the 141 words that it takes Luke to tell this short story to occupy a lifetime of reflection.

We have so much to learn about faith. We have so much to learn about healing. We have so much to learn about gratitude. And we have so much to learn about who we define as the outcasts in our own society.

As I reflected this week back upon all my conversations with Oral Roberts, all the chapel services, and the sermons, and the partner

seminars where I heard him preach, I can't remember a sermon on this scripture. There must have been one – the combination of leprosy, faith, and healing in this story seemed tailor-made for the message that Oral preached.

What I do remember is my fourth year in college.

By that time I was the Student Body President at ORU, and was well on-my-way towards becoming a radical young challenger to those in authority – especially to those in religious authority. It would be an immense understatement to say that during my year as Student Body President that the personal relationship between Oral and me changed dramatically. We found ourselves 'at odds' with each other in a profound way. It all fell apart, in a strange twist of fate, over the issue of those ministry partner weekends – the occasions when, just the year before, I had been spending some of my Sunday afternoons sitting with Oral around his kitchen table.

Towards the end of that fourth year, I became physically ill and was hospitalized. I was in St. Francis Hospital in Tulsa for about a week, undergoing round after round of tests. Some of my friends and family thought that it was a matter of stress. It turned out that I had a 'bug' that was hanging around in my system and doing me no good whatsoever.

But when we still didn't know what was going on, I am in my hospital bed, poked and prodded and connected to IV drips. The door opens – and in walks the Provost of the University, a man who I greatly admire, Carl

Hamilton – and behind him is Oral Roberts. The last person I had expected to see.

He pulled up a chair, sat by my side, and gave me "pastoral care" in the very best sense of the word. Then we had a prayer. The same kind of prayer that I had heard Oral deliver hundreds and hundreds of times. But this time – his hands were on me.

Just a few weeks before, the administration of ORU and I had been going at each other like cats and dogs. But on that night, he and Dr. Hamilton were sitting by my hospital bed asking God to heal me.

Well – to quote the old Monty Python movie - I got better. Did the antibiotics finally kick-in? Did all of the tests just finally blow the bug out of me? Did Oral's prayer do the trick?

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Finally, in the end, God brings healing to each of us. Healing comes to each of us, because it is God's desire that we all become whole, and that we all become one.

One with God and one with each other.

*We the ten lepers with scars and wounds long for your healing touch. From our deepest depths we cry to you, "Jesus, Master! Have compassion on us!" A Samaritan threw himself at your feet. We throw ourselves into your love. Heal us. Make us whole. Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> The Center for Liturgy, St. Louis University:  
<http://liturgy.slu.edu/28OrdC101407/prayerpathmain.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. *The Prophetic Imagination*.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.noragallagher.org/resurrection/sermon.pdf>