

“And All Were Healed”

Mark 6:53-56

Richard C. Allen

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South Glastonbury

Connecticut

I have a visual aide this morning. This is ngaka, a common mat woven from grasses found outside every village in Malawi. It serves as a sleeping pad, a sitting area for afternoon conversations, and a refuge for anyone who needs a place to rest. This one happens to have been a gift from Lexon and Rosemary Kalanje. But all over the country they are really about the same.

The ngaka is an invitation to sit awhile, to rest one's weary bones, to enjoy some sacred company, and maybe a cup of tea and a hunk of cassava. If you have visited my office, you have seen this ngaka up against a wall, a constant symbol of welcome and an invitation to the kind of healing that comes with being heard. If the medical doctor's symbol is a stethoscope, the traditional healer's symbol is a grass mat woven by village women.

I had traveled that day many miles over rough country roads in the bed of a pickup truck, in the back seat of an over-crowded mini-van, and the last mile and half on the back of a bicycle. I had just visited the grave of an old friend and found my way at last to Katundu village, just outside of Luanda in Southern Malawi. Mrs. Tonoh had spread out the ngaka. She came over with hot tea and boiled cassava. I sipped the beverage and nibbled at the bitter root, felt the straw beneath me, exhaled and inhaled deeply. The village elder, a man named Ten Cows, came and chatted with me for maybe thirty minutes. Children stopped by to shake hands and to offer a friendly greeting. Passersby waved. And what I knew in those late afternoon moments was that I had experienced a kind of healing there on the ngaka.

I tell you that story because it helps me to begin to understand the Biblical narratives where Jesus touched wounded people, and wounded people touched his garments, and all were healed. It was hard for me, as a student of the Bible, to understand how all this healing could take place. It sounded a bit too magical to me. It sounded unreal, hard to believe. What draws me back to Africa again and again are these settings such as the one I described from Katundu village, where life appears to be somewhat like life must have been in Biblical times. When I sit on an ngaka at the end of a long day and exchange greetings with Mr. Ten Cows, and a smile with Mr. Chikatiko and use simple Chichewa words to tell about my day, and hold hot tea in my hands, I begin to understand the kind of healing Jesus offered.

Healing comes when somebody takes the time to hear your full story. I have a hunch Jesus took that kind of time with everyone who approached him: enough time to hear someone's confession, enough time to hear someone's life story, enough time to hear as no one else had bothered to hear ever before. That kind of a person doesn't come along very often. Mostly, we're all in a hurry. We are willing to listen but please give us the condensed, five minute version of your story!

Before we die, we all want some human being to listen to our entire story. This is one definition of a spiritual healing. Thus, it's my hope that when I die, I will have been healed; that is, I will have been blessed by someone who has taken the time to hear me out.

I believe lots of people Jesus encountered left his presence having had that profound experience of being known, fully known. When they reached their abode at the end of the day, they would have been able to say to a neighbor, "I met a man today who healed me."

Being healed is different from being cured. I am sure Jesus cured a lot of illnesses and mended a lot of broken bones, and performed many miracles. Of this I have no doubt. When it says in the text, “All were healed,” my hunch is that Jesus had been doing this spiritual kind of healing, what I call ‘the healing of the soul.’

Some of you are acquainted with the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. These steps have been borrowed by many other recovery groups. They are a proven path to sobriety or to other forms of wholeness. Each step contributes something unique to the healing process. It is a spiritual healing more than a cure. Though most participants in 12 step programs sit on comfortable chairs, they might just as well be sitting on ngaka.

Of the twelve steps, the one I am most familiar with is the fifth step. In this dreaded step, a person admits to one’s self, to God, and to another human being the exact nature of his or her wrongs. On many occasions, it has been my sacred privilege to be the other human being, the one who listens to every word spoken. When an appointment is made to conduct a fifth step, we set the whole day aside and are prepared for a second day and a third if necessary. What we know is that sobriety, another word for healing, comes when the whole story can be shared and received. One doesn’t need a PhD for this ministry or a Masters in Divinity or any specialized training in a seminary. One needs only to be willing to listen as long as it takes, as long as it takes.

When I think about our nation and all the nations of the world with the many illnesses, chronic and acute, I am so grateful for all the research that is being done. Trillions of dollars are rightly directed toward finding cures for cancer and Alzheimer’s and Lou Gehrig’s disease and AIDS and Heart Disease. I rejoice in all the scientists who are working around the clock.

The role churches have to play in the health of a nation is the role I've been describing, finding the time to sit either on ngaka or on loveseat, listening to each other's hearts, assuring each other that the stories of our lives are valued, treasured, even regarded as sacred. I believe with all my heart that if each local church took up this healing role, the ministry begun by Jesus would be fulfilled. And all would be healed! As a pastor, I know we all die one day. My mission is that when that day comes for each of us, we will all have been healed. In the greatest of hope, Amen!