
Healing Bitter with Bitter

Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-21

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Edith lay on her bed, unable to fall asleep. Her time was slipping away. Her physical pain had been dulled and managed by the shots of morphine. But her anguished soul was unable to find rest. Her mind was besieged by one memory to the exclusion of all others: that fateful car accident that killed her 18-year old daughter, so many decades ago. If only she had not let her daughter take the car. If only she'd told her daughter to drive more carefully. If only her husband had found it in himself to forgive her. But it was useless. Her husband had left her, bitter with sadness, years ago. And here she was, dying, alone.

"Mom?" A quiet voice broke the stillness of the sunlit room. It was Mark, her surviving son. Edith knew better than to bring up the issue with him. While they rarely discussed it, Edith knew that Mark shared his father's opinion. He held her responsible for the death of his only sister. But later that evening, as he prepared to leave, he sat down next to her. And for the first time she heard the words her soul had yearned for so desperately for so long. "Mom", he said, gently taking her hand. "I forgive you".

There were no words to say. She smiled. Mark smiled back. No words could do the moment justice. No words were needed. Mark leant forward and kissed her goodnight. He left her side and quietly shut the door. Edith passed away the next morning.

Edith was able to find healing before she died. But not everyone discovers healing and reconciliation like Edith did. Many people leave this life full of regret, surrounded by unresolved relationships and bearing broken hearts.

I recently completed my volunteer training at Duke Hospice. Hospice is an attempt to care in circumstances where medicine cannot cure. That which our world wants to ignore, our imminent death, hospice looks squarely in the face. Hospice faces death with hope, not with terror. One of the ways hope is present is through tasks of healing, where the loving acts of forgiving and being forgiven enable the saying of goodbye. Edith discovered the irony that it was only in the process of dying that she could be forgiven and be healed. To participate in this kind of healing is not an easy thing to do, for it often requires digging up decades of bitterness and hurt.

To be healed requires us to recognize where our sin has caused brokenness in our lives. This is repentance. But next we need to admit that we cannot heal ourselves through sheer willpower or our own determination. Rather, we need to cry out to God. It is God who takes us through the process of healing, where we are made whole again.

In Mitch Albom's novel The Five People You Meet in Heaven, Eddie the maintenance man dies on his 83rd birthday trying to save a little girl from an amusement park ride gone wrong. He goes on to meet five people in heaven, five people who teach him a different lesson about life. In the last pages of the book, he meets Tala. Tala, a little Filipino girl of five or six, gently motions to him - She speaks: "You burn me". "What did you say?" Eddie does not understand. "You burn me. You make me fire". It all comes rushing back to him - the torching of that bamboo hut in the Philippines in the days of the war, where he thought saw a shadow in the flame, but no, it couldn't be. "Big fire. You burn me. Not safe". Eddie's soul and body collapse as he comes face to face with his sin of many years ago. This is the moment he recognizes how desperately he needs healing. He looks steadily into her eyes, and says, "I killed you, I KILLED YOU...forgive me...FORGIVE ME, OH, GOD...What have I done...WHAT HAVE I DONE?" The physical, emotional and spiritual pain of recognizing his sin was necessary before he could repent.

Eddie calls out to God to forgive him, for a chance at healing. And God does not ignore his call. When he looks up, Tala is standing in the river, holding a stone. "You wash me", she says softly. As Eddie lifts his defeated head, he sees she is now covered in burns, with grotesque scars covering her face. He recoils at the sight. "You wash me". Reluctantly Eddie takes the stone and walks toward her. Slowly and gently he begins to scrub her charred forearm. Gradually the scars loosen and fall off. Eddie continues the methodical, therapeutic process, being forced to see the pain of every scab he had caused. After her scars are completely healed, and her flesh restored, Eddie realizes that, in this act of penitence, he, as much as Tala, has been healed.

When he first met Tala, Eddie did not recognize her as that shadow of many years ago. It was only through revelation that he was able to realize what he had done. Before we can repent of our sin, we must complete the necessary first step of recognizing it. It was only through grace that Eddie was able to see his sin through this little girl; it is a gift of grace to be able to recognize what has gone wrong in our own lives, in our own communities. This is what the disciplines of Lent are about. These disciplines train us to be able to recognize the sin in our lives. If we remain blind to the injustices around us, we can never repent for the pain that we have caused.

From recognizing his sin against humanity in Tala, to crying out to God for forgiveness, and going through the process of penitence, Eddie has been healed. It was not an easy process, nor was it pain-free. But it was an act of healing before Eddie reached his eternal home.

And that brings us to the book of Numbers. In today's reading we see how the Israelites found healing in the face of death. By this point in the story of the exodus, the Israelites have been wandering around in the desert (big surprise), when they become impatient on the way (again - shocker). They complain bitterly: "We're hungry, we're thirsty. This food tastes gross." I think most of us can relate to this scene. Throw in an "Are we there yet??", some broken air conditioning and "I know a song that gets on everybody's nerves" and this sounds eerily reminiscent of early childhood road trips. God, like an exasperated parent, is finally fed up with all of it. But the Israelites get a much worse punishment than a time-out: poisonous serpents.

It takes the Israelites looking into the serpent's face, the face of death, for them to recognize their sin against the Lord. They quickly appeal to Moses: "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us" (Num. 21:7). See how the story says that the Israelites have to realize what they had done wrong. "The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you.'" The Israelites recognize and admit their sin to Moses and to God. Only then does Moses begin to intervene on their behalf.

Moses bails them out again, and, on the Lord's command, sets a bronze serpent on a pole. From that point, "whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live" (Num. 21:9).

God is saying to the Israelites, "Look upon what has caused your pain and suffering, look at your sin and rebellion. Only then can you be healed". Their source of pain is also the symbol for their healing. "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look it at and live". Now, don't miss the connection with the Adam and Eve story here, for serpents have been plaguing humanity since the beginning of creation. Israel is saying, "We need to go right back to the beginning. We need to go back to the core of human rebellion to find healing." Israel needs to be reminded of the source of their pain, both physical and spiritual brokenness, in order to be healed.

When the Israelites cry out for help, they say to Moses: "Pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us". The Israelites are asking Moses to beseech the Lord to take away the snakes. And what does the Lord do? He tells Moses "make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole." And then we learn, "Whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live". We never discover whether or not the actual serpents that were plaguing the people ever went away. The people were healed of their snake bites whenever they looked at the serpent of bronze, but whether or not they ever stopped getting bit, we do not know. The point is, the people found a way to healing. Their problem wasn't the serpents. Their problem was themselves.

It is like the short-sighted nature of any child, the inability to see past one's own immediate requests. We plead and cry for things that we are certain that we need, but God, knowing our needs before we even ask, stretches our imagination farther than we could expect or hope. The Israelites wanted to be healed from the curse of the present snakes; God provided a way to be healed from the snakes of the past, present and future. God's healing brings us forward, past our original broken state, to a place of new creation and salvation. God did not just heal the Israelites of their past physical wounds, but enabled them to be healed of future wounds as well.

Now let's fast forward through the Old Testament and find out a little more about this serpent. In 2 Kings we discover that the Israelites have turned the serpent into an idol. King Hezekiah is praised for breaking into "pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it" (2 Kings 18:4). Rather than worshipping the Healer, they came to worship the symbol of healing. They forgot their true deliverer, the one

who had raised them out of Egypt and who had “healed them and delivered them from destruction” (Psalm 107:20).

The turning of the bronze serpent into an idol in Hezekiah’s time was a sign that Israel had lost its way. But then Jesus walks into the story. Listen to these words from John’s gospel. “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up”. Jesus is the one who draws out all the poison from our lives so that we might find healing. Jesus is the one who is lifted up on a pole for all the people to see. Jesus is the one to whom we can turn at any moment and be reconciled to one another and to God. Jesus is the one in whom we go back to the creation story and the root of our sin and begin to find life anew.

Jesus comes to replace the bronze snake, to give us the healing that we have been crying out for from false idols. He must be lifted up to replace the idols that we have created, pretending that it is something other than the Almighty God who can heal us. In order for us to look upon Him and believe, we must do as the Israelites did. We must first recognize our sin and repent of it, and then cry out to God for help. And it is in the pain of this process, of coming to terms with the habits that we are slaves to, that we can be delivered and healed.

Healing, in God’s terms, is not always pain-free. As one rabbi wrote, “See how different are human ways from God’s ways. For [people], the sweet heals the bitter, but this is not so for the Creator (for whom) the bitter heals the bitter.” The bitter heals the bitter. For Israel, the serpent healed the rebellion. For us, the cross heals our separation. Jesus’ cross absorbs the poison that is our sin. The scandal of the cross, the shame of crucifixion, the ugliness of Christ’s broken body is the ultimate bitter, the ultimate poison. The healing of the cross is not pain-free. It is only in the unimaginable bitterness of the Christ’s crucifixion that the vast bitterness of our separation from God is bridged. It is only in this sacrifice of Christ being lifted up before us, taking our shame, our sin, our poison, that we can be healed.

The Israelites came face to face with their mortality before they were healed before God. Edith was reconciled to her son only in the face of death; Eddie had to die before he could be healed of his sins of so long ago. With the gift of death, there is hope for healing, a healing that could include pain. But we also have hope that this healing that will make us a new creation, for it is in dying that we are reconciled to each other and to God.

So when you are lying there on your deathbed, what sins will you need to recognize? Will you cry out to God for forgiveness? And as your pain is finally healed, who will it be, that you are finally reconciled with?