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Synopsis:

**“Reshaping the Healing Narratives in the Light of
Progressive Theology.”**

Research indicates that there are 23 examples of Jesus ‘healing ministry’ in the canonical gospels, if we include the stories of the ‘raising of the dead.’ In reality these stories are simply just a ‘tip of the iceberg’ of Jesus healing ministry and yet they receive little acknowledgement from New Testament scholars and theologians.

The traditional interpretation of these narratives, paint a largely negative attitude towards people seeking wholeness. However, if we examine them in the light of progressive New Testament scholarship we recognize them as examples of empowerment promoting the ‘empowering tenor of the reign of God in Christian lore.’

“Reshaping the Healing Narratives in the Light of Progressive Theology.”

Introduction:

The Healing Narratives are those stories recorded in the gospels as examples of Jesus healing ministry. My research indicates that there are at least 20 such narratives in the canonical gospels or 23 if you include the three stories of the ‘Raising of the Dead’. Many of these stories, some with variations, are repeated. In all there are 47 stories of healing recorded in the gospels. These can be divided into a number of categories such as physical and sensory disabilities, leprosy and chronic illness, demonic possession or mental illness, fever and raising the dead. The Jesus Seminar have identified 6 of these narratives that can be traced back to and originating from Jesus himself and with the repetitions 13 of these stories in all.

However, these narratives are but a tip of the iceberg if we accept the statements in the gospel according to Matthew 15: 29 – 30 “Great crowds came to him bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute and many others. They were put at his feet and he cured them, ...”

And again in Mark 1: 32-34 “That evening at sunset they brought to him all that were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around his door.”

These narratives make up a significant and important aspect of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. John Dominic Crossan¹ claims that the “Healing Narratives “ and “Open Commensality” or “Open Table” are the two most critical ingredients in understanding the life ministry of Jesus. Diarmuid

¹ Crossan J D “The Birth of Christianity” HarperSanFrancisco 1998

O'Murchu² in his book *“Christianity’s Dangerous Memory – A Rediscovery of the Revolutionary Jesus”* writes, “ healing and commensality serve primarily as empowering endeavours and should be prioritized if we wish to safeguard and promote the empowering tenor of the new reign of God in Christian lore.” I will return to the importance of the concept of ‘empowerment’ a little later.

Whilst there is a wealth of information about the healing ministry of Jesus there is a dearth of serious analysis about the importance of this ministry in the life of faith communities today. There is also a need to de-construct some of the misconceptions, if for no other reason than they impact negatively on people with disabilities.

Traditional attitudes to people with illness and Disabilities:

Many of the negative traditional Christian attitudes to people with illness and disability have stemmed from a simplistic understanding of the healing narratives. This interpretation has failed to take into account the attitudes and beliefs of people in the 1st Century CE and our current knowledge of the disabling condition through the advancement of medical science. Many people in the time of Jesus saw disability as a punishment. This interpretation was further fashioned by a belief that we live in a ‘cause and effect’ world. Nothing happens without a reason. Thus if we do this then the consequence will be this. Further many of our traditional theological perspectives have been fashioned around the concept of an interventionist God which assumes that everything that happens to us has a divine purpose. The healing narratives have in the past been largely interpreted as miracles made possible by Jesus’ divine power. Accordingly, Jesus was considered not only divine and the ‘Son of God”, he was seen as equal with God, hence, some of the reasons given for disabling conditions in the past have been that God has done this as:

² O'Murchu Diarmuid “Christianity’s Dangerous Memory” Crossroad Publishing 2011 Chapter 5

Punishment for sin.

An opportunity for Character development.

A test of faith.

Whilst these attitudes appear antiquated in the 21st century many still surface, at times unconsciously and particularly in times of stress.

Our theology and approach to people seeking healing has been determined largely by our interpretation of the healing narratives, which in turn has been fashioned by our image of divine intervention. Not only has it fashioned our approach to the individual it has formed our approach to the systemic forces that marginalize and isolate people seeking healing. Hence, there is a need to re-examine these narratives in the light of current practice and enlightened New Testament scholarship within the context the context in which they occurred.

The Challenge:

During the last 25 years we have seen a challenge in our traditional interpretation of the gospel “Healing Narratives” and this has come from two almost independent sources. The first challenge came for people seeking healing themselves and their advocates. Many of these people were challenging the barriers that prevented their full participation as members of faith communities primarily from a social justice perspective. Physical and social exclusion from places of worship were seen as discriminatory. Many of the barriers preventing people with healing needs from participating in communal life, were connected to the traditional Biblical interpretation of the healing narratives. In the late 1980’s a movement sometimes referred to as “Inclusive Spirituality” advocated for people with disabilities to be included in all aspects of faith communities and urged a re-examination of the traditional interpretation of the healing narratives. This movement was less a

theological exercise and more a political form of resistance to the marginalizing of people with disabilities. It was simply a social justice issue.

The second force for the reshaping of the healing narratives has come from the dramatic rise in New Testament Scholarship, particularly from the historical Jesus school of theology. Perhaps the most significant impact of this approach has been, not only a clearer understanding of Greek and Aramaic words, but the more enlightened placing of each narrative in its social, political economic and religious context. This has allowed the bible student to more accurately understand the impact of the healing on the individual. However, perhaps more significantly we can more fully appreciate the impact of Jesus' actions on the contextual systems that label, isolate, marginalize and in some cases make 'dead' people undergoing normal bodily functioning, such as menstruation.

Firstly, we need to understand from the 'historical Jesus' perspective, how these narratives appropriately set in context, can assist us in understanding the needs of people seeking healing and wholeness. Secondly, I believe that by bringing these two forces together we can better address the systemic processes that create barriers, label and marginalize people with illness and disabilities.

In short a scholarly Biblical analysis of these narratives gives intellectual integrity to how we respond to people seeking healing.

The Woman who had been Hemorrhaging for 12 years:

In the time available I only have time to examine one example of how the recent New Testament scholarship impacts on the interpretation of the healing narratives and gives new direction as to how a community of faith we can respond. The story I have chosen is the well-known story of the woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years. I will also include briefly the story of Jairus' daughter because both these stories are interwoven in more ways than one.

This story can be found, with variations, in three gospels Mt 9: 18 – 26, Mark 5: 21 – 43, and Luke 8: 40-56. I will attempt to interpret this story from the perspective of a Jesus seminar scholar and further consider the implications of this interpretation from a 'practice' perspective.

Firstly let us quickly re-cap this story.

We begin with Jesus walking with one of the elders of the synagogue a man named Jairus, a leader in the community. They are heading to his house because his daughter is sick and Jesus has been asked to heal her. On their journey they are surrounded by a large crowd and as these people begin to press in Jesus experiences a special contact with a woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years. The number twelve is significant in that Jairus daughter is said to be 12 years of age.

As a result of the woman's touch Jesus stops what he is doing to respond to the woman's need, whilst he is speaking to her he hears of the child's death, undeterred he continues to the house of Jairus and announces that the girl is not 'dead' but sleeping and he recommends she be given food.

Let us now examine closely the situation concerning this woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years. Keeping in mind that Jesus has a reputation for sharing meals and time with all comers including unattached women; so his direct response to a woman would not be considered out of character. However, it would have caused consternation for those around him, especially his disciples. In reality Jesus condemns the world of exclusion, because he does not condemn the woman for her actions. His acceptance of her is demonstrated by his use of the term 'daughter'. His words affirm that her blood flow doesn't make her unclean. The 'purity laws' are themselves false boundaries that marginalize her and stand in the way for healing to occur. If healing is to be successful she will require the support of friends and family and she will need to be included in her community.

It is important for people who are seeking healing to feel that they are in, what Bonhoeffer refers to as a 'State of Grace'; that they belong, that they are people of worth and they are valued. The woman in this story is being denied a state of grace as well as being excluded from the nurturing personal and social activities that come from intimate contact. For 12 years she had been hemorrhaging. For 12 years she had been considered unclean by her faith community, not only is she unclean, everything she touches she makes unclean including the clothes that Jesus is wearing. Her touch makes Jesus unclean. Her partner, her children, the bed she slept on, her clothes her cooking utensils are all contaminated by her declared state of being 'unclean'. As sexual relationships are forbidden during this time it is quite conceivable that her partner has left her and that her family and friends have abandoned her.

To understand this situation we may find it valuable to imagine what it would be like to be this person, what does this condition mean to you as a human being. Just for a minute imagine what it would be like to spend a whole day without being touched, without being held gently and lovingly, without being caressed. Now try to imagine how you would feel if you went a week or a month without touch. Now imagine what it would be like to go through twelve long years of isolation; living without embrace. Forget for a moment the isolating effect of the 'purity laws'; consider for a moment how this woman would be feeling physically as well as psychologically. In all likelihood her iron count would be quite low bringing with it a loss of energy and debilitating tiredness which only compound her feelings of isolation. She must have felt exhausted and incredibly alone and quite possibly depressed.

To make matters worse in Mark's account we read that she has spent money on physicians to no avail. Under the temple cult she would have been urged to purify herself by bathing in the pools just outside the temple and for this she would have to pay the priestly authorities. However, her search for a cure had only left her in a state of poverty (common today among people

with chronic illness or disability), additional to her state of marginalization and shame.

In the depth of despair her search for healing becomes desperate so she embarks on this risky venture. She has obviously heard of the healing power of this man, Jesus of Nazareth and so with the protection of the crowd she comes up to him from behind and touches his clothes. Maybe she believed that this act in itself would be sufficient and then she could melt back into the crowd and return home. It does appear that she believed by this very act, that of touching his clothes she would receive healing. But what an incredible risk this woman takes just by being in a crowd in her state of ritual impurity. She takes an even greater risk by reaching out to touch Jesus. Regardless of her condition just being a woman in the society of this day she would be shamed, simply by touching a male stranger without his consent and without being introduced to him by a male friend or member of her family.

Touching Jesus clothes is the same as touching his person, both his clothes and his person are now impure. Jesus would have been aware of this fact.

This is a desperate act but if she doesn't have a male friend to intercede for her so is there an option? If she were to shout 'unclean', 'unclean' the crowd would have prevented her from getting close. She has nothing to lose by taking this form of action. She is already treated as if she were non-existent, in fact she has been made 'dead' by her church and her society. It is interesting to note that young menstruating women were also considered 'dead' by their family and society. Diarmuid O'Murchu³ suggests that Jairus' daughter may have been experiencing her first menstruation and when Jesus requests that she be given something to eat, it is possible that he is instructing the family that she eat with them at their table. In so doing they are including her back into the embrace of the family.

³ O'Murchu "Christianity's Dangerous Memory" Op cit

What is Jesus reaction to the desperate action of this bold and assertive woman? He stops what he is doing and responds to the woman's dilemma. He responds to her by calling her 'daughter' a term of endearment and by so doing recognizes her as a person of worth. Jesus offers her something that she has craved for 12 years a relationship with another human being. Jesus then says, 'Daughter your faith has made you well: go in peace and be healed of your disease' (Mk 5:34). In making the statement, "Your faith has made you well." Jesus is giving the woman credit for the healing, rather than claiming credit for himself. Stephen Finlan in his book *"Problems with the Atonement"*⁴, emphasizes the theological point that healing is not dependent on the death of Jesus. If Jesus claims, "Your faith has made you whole", which he does six times in the healing narratives, then at that point you are whole. The healing experience is already available. Jesus doesn't say, "after my soon to occur death you will be healed and only after I am dead will you be made whole." Thus Jesus doesn't see salvation or healing as being dependent on his sacrificial death, (a point that needs far more exploration than we have time for today). Jesus at no time requests the woman to believe in him as 'Savior' before announcing she has been made whole, nor does he make this request in other healing narratives.

What then are the characteristics of interpreting the Healing Narratives in this way and how can we, as individuals and members of faith communities, respond to individuals seeking healing?

The Impact of recent New Testament scholarship

The differences between a 'progressive' interpretation of the healing narratives and a traditional interpretation can be summarized by a number of important characteristics.

1. The Importance of Context

⁴ Finlan Stephen "Problems with Atonement" Liturgical Press 2005

Placing the story in context or as Crossan⁵ explains, “understanding the ‘matrix’ is an integral part of understanding the ‘Healing Narratives’ and in fact all of the Bible stories. Dominic Crossan has afforded us many insights and perhaps one of the most significant is to place the words and actions of the historical Jesus in a social, religious, political and economic context and he has done so with exquisite detail. He has not only achieved this, he has also alerted us to the multiplicative approach of how these systems impact on and interact with each other. Knowledge of the temple cult is important, but the relationship between the temple cult and the Roman authorities helps us understand the greater complexity of systemic interplay. We need to recognize in the example of the woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years the isolating power of the ‘purity laws’ and the inhibiting nature of the rules and roles of the patriarchal society. Only then can we experience a deeper understanding of the plight of this woman and the level of her disempowerment. Today as a result of Crossan’s work and the work of other New Testament scholars, we know far more about the living conditions. We are now more attuned to the psychological effect of people living under the threat of a foreign military power and its impact on the individual’s understanding of being liberated as a result of this work.

2. Healing and/or Curing

Kathy Black⁶ and Dominic Crossan⁷ raise the importance of making a distinction between curing and healing. As Black explains ‘curing’ will mean that the person is ‘healed’, but healing does not necessarily mean that a person is ‘cured’. Crossan explains that disease is a personal thing, he states, *‘it is between me and my body and the thing that infects me*

⁵ Crossan John Dominic “The Birth of Christianity” Op cit

⁶ Black Kathy “The Healing Homiletic” Abingdon Press 1996

⁷ Crossan Op cit

and when something is wrong with my body I take it to my doctor to be fixed. This does not tell us about the psychological effect of the illness or its social impact on my friendships.” The example Crossan gives is AIDS, he suggests that while a cure for AIDS is important, in its absence we can heal the illness by refusing to marginalize, those who have it, by empathizing with their anguish and embracing their suffering with respect and love. The same can be said for people who have cerebral palsy or who are amputees or have been born with Down Syndrome. Many of these people feel whole and do not consider themselves in need of healing, but do desire to live with a sense of belonging.
(Example of Lorna Hallahan)

3. Empathizing with the person seeking healing.

Bernard Brandon Scott in his book *“Re-Imagine the World”*⁸ suggested that to understand a parable we should attempt to imagine ourselves as being present and witnessing the event. By immersing ourselves in the healing narratives it may help us understand the full impact of the situation by attempting to experience the feelings of the person seeking healing as if they were our own. To use our own life experience and knowledge of the situation or a similar one and to get inside the skin of the person as if it were happening to us, will afford us a deeper understanding of the need for healing.

There is a classic story of Jesus’ interaction with a woman at the house of Simon the Pharisee in the Gospel according to Luke Chapter 7. This is a story that is retold in one form or another in all canonical gospels. I am sure you are well acquainted with this story where a single woman comes to a banquet where Jesus is a guest. Much to the consternation of those present she washes his feet with her tears and dries them with her hair and anoints them with an expensive ointment.

⁸ Scott B.B. *“Re-Imagine the World”* Polebridge Press 2001

Those present voice their disapproval that Jesus would allow such a thing to happen from a woman with a bad reputation. In response Jesus replies, *"She has shown great love"* and in so doing he is able to accept what the woman offers as a way of seeking reconnection and he does so without condemning her past behaviour.

Note what Jesus doesn't say! He does not tell her that she is evil and sinful and has no right to be in his presence let alone touch him. He does not say, *"Depart from you lustful temptress because the evil one has sown his deadly seed in you"*. Jesus realizes that he does not have to condemn her because her action and her tears display that she already condemns herself and she is judging herself far more harshly than the Pharisee or even God would. The perceptiveness of Jesus to the human plight in social situations needs to be studied in more depth because it portrays the compassion of God.

4. Reason, Experience and/or Knowledge, Tradition and Scripture.

It was John Wesley the founder of Methodism, who emphasized the ⁹ importance of seeking enlightenment from the sacred by including not only 'scripture' as does Martin Luther and not only 'scripture and tradition' as do the Catholics, but our own personal 'knowledge' or 'experience' and 'reason' in interpreting the sacred. Paul Laughlin a Jesus Seminar scholar has just written an article about Wesley's contribution in the Hunt/ Smith book *"Why Weren't We Told?"*. Colin Williams book *"John Wesley's Theology Today"*¹⁰ also is a good resource in this matter. To use reason and our own experience and knowledge grounds our interpretation as a human experience and removes our understanding of healing from the realm of the supernatural. Healing becomes a human activity that we all have the ability to possess. There is no magical mysterious 'nose twitching' required. Healing in this

⁹ Hunt Rex A. E. and Smith John W. H. *Why Weren't We Told?* Polebridge Press 2013

¹⁰ Williams Colin W. *"John Wesley's Theology Today"* Epworth Press 1960

way requires a perceptiveness of the controlling societal systems as well as an awareness of the needs and strengths of the one seeking healing. If reason, experience and knowledge conflict with scripture and tradition we need ask why. As Spong suggests 'don't leave your brains in the car park.'

5. Changing the Power Relationship

5.1 The Companionship of Empowerment

A Progressive Theological interpretation of the healing narratives changes significantly the relationship between the person seeking healing and the healing community. When Jesus proclaims, "your faith has made you whole", he changes the relationship with the sacred from one of master/servant to in Crossan's¹¹ terms a 'companionship of empowerment'. O'Murchu also takes this issue up in his book *'Christianity's Dangerous Memory'*¹². The healing narrative I have presented today is not about curing a natural bodily function. It is about healing, it is a metaphor about liberating a woman who has been declared 'dead' to the community and excluded from participation by inappropriate religious and societal practices. This is a story about empowerment and liberation. It is a story about challenging the damaging nature of society's systemic forces. This healing is possible when just one person stands in solidarity with the marginalized and names the debilitating systems that isolate and marginalize.

5.2 The art of Resistance

Often Jesus actions and words challenged the hierarchal structure of society. The two important elements of his mission were 'Open

¹¹ Crossan John D "Birth of Christianity" Op cit

¹² Op cit

Commensality' or open table and his instruction to his disciples to *'heal in return for hospitality'*. Jesus resistance to authority figures and systems of authority was subtle, but no less effective, by his standing in solidarity with people to resist the defining and labeling conditions of society such as the 'Purity laws". Crossan¹³ concludes his chapter on *"The Meaning of Healing", "I see the same God at Work in the healing and the eating as non-violent resistance to systemic evil."*p304

(Example of the Cynic Diogenes)

Summary and Conclusion:

A 'reshaping' of the "Healing Narratives" from an historical Jesus perspective can assist us in responding appropriately to the needs of people seeking healing, particularly by emphasising the importance of 'inclusion', 'liberation' and 'embrace' as integral to the healing process. They further encourage faith communities to understand their role as important players in the healing process. The narratives however do far more if they challenge not only the marginalization of such people; but also when they confront the systemic forces that inhibit the opportunity to achieve liberation. The labeling and isolating effects are often determined by societal norms and outdated and inappropriate theology can and do prevent inclusion from occurring

The narratives, seen in this new light demonstrate that it only takes one person to stand in solidarity with a marginalize person to challenge the forces preventing community inclusion. We can truly be in a "companionship of empowerment" which is a mutually beneficial and liberating activity. For faith communities to achieve this status we must show intentionality in the way we live and respond to those seeking

¹³ Crossan op cit p304

healing. This can be achieved by purposively putting in place processes that encourage inclusion of people seeking healing and 'raising to consciousness' the unconscious rejection of such people by societal systems.

Appropriate medical care makes a significant and important contribution and is essential but, equally important is being surrounded by people who willing to challenge the systems, embrace, give love, support and inclusion, as O'Murchu states, *"The gospel healing narratives – understood afresh offer hope and promise for the broken heartedness of our traumatized age."*
P93

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