

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

LET THE HEALING FLOW
Sermon for Pentecost 2B-Mk 3:20-35
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Interest in midwifery has burgeoned of late because of the PBS series *Call the Midwife*, but for years this ancient profession has been in eclipse. For over a century, the usual practice is for pregnant women to consult doctors instead (usually males.) But when you think about it, this is an aberration in human history. It is far more intuitive for a woman to go to another woman for help with the uniquely womanly task of childbirth.

I have just finished reading a book called *the Midwife of Hope River* by Patricia Harman. This is the story of a woman practicing midwifery in the mountains of West Virginia during the Great Depression. It's a novel, but from what I know of midwifery, the history it describes is accurate.

The fact is that once the medical establishment realized that obstetrics could be lucrative, it set about monopolizing that particular practice, and then protecting its control over it by limiting what midwives could legally do. Harman describes how a midwife was prohibited by law from doing internal examinations. If such an examination became necessary, the midwife was to call a doctor. If she did such an examination herself, even if it was medically necessary and a life-or-death emergency, she would, if reported, lose her license and her livelihood.

The only problem was that there were often no doctors within calling distance. It's a rare doctor who chooses to serve impoverished areas like Appalachia (or the slums of London.) There's no money in obstetrics amongst the poor. So midwives did what they had to do to save lives, but under constant suspicion from the medical establishment, which to a large extent declined to do the work these rural midwives were doing. A midwife could do exemplary, healing work, often with better results than a trained doctor in a hospital, but if targeted by those in power, she could lose everything.

Jesus was a midwife. Not literally, of course. But like the midwives of Depression-Era Appalachia, Jesus provided healing and care for people who needed it desperately but were being neglected by the experts – the establishment – the very same people who had been entrusted with their care. Like many midwives, Jesus' very success, his very excellence at doing what the establishment was supposed to be doing, earned him their scrutiny and enmity.

In Jesus' case of course, the scrutiny and enmity came from the religious, rather than the medical, establishment: the Pharisees. Like the medical establishment, the Pharisees had started out with noble intentions. Medicine, in instituting their restrictive laws on midwives, had wanted to protect the public from incompetent, untrained persons and quackery. The Pharisees were likewise inspired by an intention to protect: to protect the ancient traditions of Judaism, and thereby worship God with appropriate holiness.

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What both the medical establishment and the Pharisees ended up protecting was their own turf, to the detriment of the very people who needed the most help. Medicine ended up preventing poor women not from incompetent care but from receiving any obstetrical care at all. The Pharisees ended up not protecting God's holiness, but by standing in the way of God's love of the poor.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus bursts on the scene with a series of healing miracles that immediately set him at odds with the religious establishment. Those of you who saw the entirety of Mark's Gospel performed last Tuesday at St. Matthew's must surely have been impressed by this, hearing all the stories performed in order as intended. In three short chapters Jesus has exorcised a demon in the synagogue, cured Simon's mother-in-law of a fever, healed people with "various diseases," driven out more demons, and healed a leper, a paralytic and a person with a shriveled hand.

Meanwhile the Pharisees are getting all bent out of shape because he's doing it the "wrong way." He's not following God's sacred rules. Jesus says, "Wait a minute. God gave us these rules so humans can be whole. What is more important, the rules or the wholeness?"

The poor could not afford the extensive system of sacrifice and cleanliness rituals imposed by the Pharisees, so they were excluded for the most part from the comforts and ministrations of temple rites. The religious establishment was impeding the flow of God's healing to the very people God loves. Jesus broke the logjam and let the healing flow free.

Jesus is a healing presence. God is healing presence. God is quintessentially a healer. God through Jesus is saying is that it is more important for people to be whole. If the rules help people to wholeness they are serving their purpose. If the rules impede the flow of God's healing to the people they can be bypassed.

The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to which Jesus refers, is the denial that God is God. God is a healer. To deny God God's ability to heal is to deny God. To stand in the way of God's healing grace is to deny God.

The implication is clear: when people impede the flow of God's healing, they are denying God's right to be God. We can only hurt ourselves this way.

Today we baptize a child, Everly Harper Nicely. In the waters of baptism we demonstrate the free flow of God's healing grace to her. May Everly always know this healing grace. May its flow to her never be impeded. May she never impede its flow to others.

May Everly's baptism here today be a sign to us of God's healing grace. May it flow through us. May we receive it and pass it on. May Everly and we, always and everywhere, let God's healing flow.