

Ann Bonner-Stewart

St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Newton

Proper 18B; Mark 7:24-37

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I recently finished reading *The Sun Also Shines*, Anthony Ray Hinton's autobiography. Ray, who prefers folks to call him Ray, was on Death Row in Alabama for nearly thirty years, from 1983 - 2013, after being convicted of first degree murders he did not commit. Since he had a strong alibi— he was at work, with a manager, and had to check in throughout the shift to receive new assignments— and the physical evidence against him had some very serious problems, Ray thought he will be released imminently, seeing as he is innocent. But the need to hold someone, anyone, preferably someone poor and black who did not have the money, to be blunt, to fight back, the need to convict someone won out, and he was charged and then convicted.

Ray didn't take this well, as you might imagine, and which is completely understandable. After his conviction, upon arriving on Death Row, Ray purposefully doesn't speak to anyone besides his best friend and mother, who comes on visiting days every other Friday, for three years. Three years! No fellow prisoners, no guards, no no one. Ray was mad at God, which, let's be real, I get it. He was in a bad place— literally and metaphorically— and if anyone needed some kind of healing, it was Anthony Ray Hinton.

In Mark today, we have two folks needing healing. We have yet another incident of an emotionally and physically burn out, and thus cranky, Jesus, the same as we did last week. Again, just like last week, Jesus tries to hide from people again, and again, he cannot escape notice. One woman from the proverbial wrong side of the tracks, which makes sense because he's in Tyre, which never was and never has been part of Israel, one woman asks Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus gets mad, and tells her to go away, that dogs shouldn't be fed when the children need food. The Syrophenician woman has a very quick, very clever response to his horrid insult, the response we wake up in the middle of the night wishing we had thought of when someone has said something salty to us. She says, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Seemingly based on this, Jesus decides to heal her daughter, from afar. After this, a group approaches Jesus to heal a friend who is deaf and mute, and Jesus heals this guy in a very hands on way. He takes the man aside, touches his ears, says a word, and spits and then touches the man's tongue, yes, it's gross.

What I appreciate about this passage from Mark is two different and still related things: healing can come in different forms and the gift of being open. Jesus heals the daughter without ever seeing her at all. He merely says something, and somehow it's done. Jesus' approach to the man who cannot hear or see could not be more different. We have this very down-to-earth, sensory way of healing that seems to have little in common with the long distance healing where Jesus never even sees the girl.

Healing sometimes is completely miraculous, perhaps like the daughter here, defying all rhyme and reason in a way that's easier for us to appreciate now since we have many more tools— medicine, hygiene— when it comes to physical healing. The text repeatedly reminds us the daughter is little, a child. Now the grown man is a different case in my mind, and where I want to talk a bit more time about. Though the man who is healed could now talk and hear, which is great and certainly incredibly miraculous, I have questions about whether or not he was healed because we don't know what happened next. This man can't get back the years of his life he had been isolated from his family and friends, not being able to communicate with them. Chances are he was illiterate as most people were, which eliminated that possible route of communication. He was also likely ostracized, shamed as there was an assumption then that your forebears had done something wrong so that you deserved whatever was wrong with you. He can't get those years back. He can't erase the hurt he had been socialized to feel. So what I really want to know is what happens the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that. I know the story says he can hear and he can talk. But did his prior conditions continue to cast a long shadow after they were long gone, as is so often the case?

Ray too couldn't get those prime years of his life back. He couldn't go back and have a family in the way that he originally envisioned for himself when he was younger. He couldn't go back to be with his mom, to whom he was incredibly close, when she died. Ray has many reasons to be perpetually angry and bitter, even after he was released. Eventually. Finally. And though his exoneration is an extremely important component in his healing, Ray's journey, which, like so many of our spiritual journeys, is not a straight line but rather loops back on itself, wanders, accelerates, and backtracks, Ray's journey towards healing begins long before, when he was still on Death Row, long before it seemed he would be released. After many years of being incarcerated, Ray makes a decision. Ray decides that he will not let this broken, dehumanizing, violent system take his soul, his humanity, or his laughter. And he works hard to try to reclaim them in whatever ways are available to him.

Ray decides to respond when another man is crying, having learned some bad news from the outside; before he tried to ignore the other prisoners, as did everyone else. The man's

name is Henry. Ray and Henry get to know each other, yelling at one another, so they could hear one another.

Ray ends up taking these individual prisoners on Death Row and creating a community. Ray gets permission to found a book club, meaning that the men were allowed to have different books in their cells. Several prisoners, though not all, were granted permission to meet in person to discuss the works of James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, and more. Those not allowed to participate in person also eventually read the books and then yell their opinions and insights at one another when they were so moved.

Meanwhile, Ray finds out that his friend Henry, Henry who inadvertently led to Ray's turning point towards healing, Henry's last name is Hayes. Henry had been raised to hate Black people. Henry was indeed guilty of what he was incarcerated for– the murder of 19 year old Michael Douglas. Henry tries to introduce Ray as his best friend to his famously racist dad during visiting hours, which didn't go well. Locked up in 5 by 7 cells, Ray and Henry somehow both become open to something that never would have happened on the outside.

Back in the Gospel, openness or lack thereof influences healing, too. The mother is open to approaching someone she's not supposed to be talking to– a man of a much higher social standing than she. The woman is open in that she doesn't crawl away, dejected, when Jesus dehumanizes and shames her. The man's friends are open to being rejected or pushed away, as they approach Jesus, begging on their friends' behalf. Even Jesus becomes more open in today's Gospel. At the beginning, Jesus is petty and cranky, which is generally his MO as Mark progresses. Even so, the woman's quick response seems to jolt him out of his mood, and then Jesus becomes open again, too, at least for a while, open to hearing someone who he doesn't want to talk to or interact with. I wonder if that's why Jesus doesn't snap at the man's friends who brought him to Jesus. Jesus seems to have been influenced to be more open in that particular moment by the woman whose daughter is healed. Jesus says, in Aramaic, the language he would have spoken at home, to heal the second guy. The Aramaic word he uses? Ephatha "Be opened." A prayer? A command? A reminder to himself, even?

What would it be like to be open to the different ways healing might need to come into our lives today? People say that all the time, and often fail to mention how hard it is. In what ways might we need further healing? Healing from nostalgia, from thinking the best is in the past and the present and future are worse? Healing from blind self-centeredness, not admitting how our own actions influence other people or the planet? Is there something that we've been healed of in some ways but not in others, maybe the condition or situation is gone but remnants still remain? What needs our individual and communal attention and

also God's grace? Ray reminds us that conditions don't have to be perfect, that sometimes all the outside stuff doesn't need to be fixed before we start healing on the inside. Be open, St. Mary's, to healing.

I'll close by reading the first verse of the sequence hymn as a communal prayer: "Heal us hands of Jesus, and search out all our pain. Restore our hope, remove our fear, and bring us peace again." Be open, St. Mary's, to healing. Amen.