

A Theology of One

by Amy L. Sherman

Have you ever noticed that Jesus took His time healing people? As He visited the villages of the holy land, we're often told by the Gospel writers of scenes like the one in Luke 4: "When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and, laying His hand on each one, He healed them." Since Jesus was planning on getting up before dawn the next day (see verse 42), you could imagine a more efficient way to handle the townspeople's wounded. What about a mass healing? Jesus came to earth with every heavenly authority and power in His hand. He could have stood at the doorway to Simon's mother-in-law's house, waved His arms over the crowd, and pronounced them all well. Zip – a thirty-second cure for the whole group, then a nice relaxing chat with the disciples, and early to bed.

But this wasn't Jesus' way. Luke tells us that Jesus healed everyone *one by one*. For Jesus, healing was a personal business. Each individual was special; each was important; each received a personal touch.

We see the pattern in Jesus' interaction with the little ones – in Matthew 19, the moms are placing their children into His arms and He's blessing them. It's taking up valuable time and the disciples are a rather irked. But not Jesus. And when He heals the deaf-mute in Mark 7, He does so with delicate sensitivity shaped by the man's individual experiences. A crowd eager to watch some hocus-pocus carries the poor guy to Jesus, but our loving Savior wants to protect the man's dignity. So He takes him aside, and uses "sign language" to explain to him what He is about to do—placing His fingers in the man's ears to symbolize His power to return hearing and touching the man's tongue as a precursor to restoring his speech.¹ It's highly individualized approach.

For Jesus, the one was important. In the parable of the sheep, the shepherd leaves the 99 to go after the one. And our Great Shepherd, we're told in John 10, knows each of His sheep by name.

In the U.S., many in the church rightly criticize American culture for often being too individualistic and not placing adequate emphasis on community. But in the midst of that appropriate critique, we must not lose sight of the critical principle of what we might call "the theology of one." It's crucial because it provides the basis for ongoing motivation for investment in the world's suffering one person at a time.

Micah 6:8 calls us to do justice and love mercy. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by the size the task, and the seeming smallness of our efforts. When hundreds of thousands are affected by famine, does our church's investment in developing better agriculture and irrigation in one African village really matter? With millions dying of AIDS, does our parish's effort to provide medicine for a few hundred families in Kenya make a difference? With some ten million children in bonded labor in India, does our congregation's role in freeing fifty slaves count?

YES.

It matters, because each individual is precious to God the Creator. He personally designs each one. Each is utterly unique. We must not let the scale of the need paralyze us, or prevent us from acting on behalf of those –admittedly few--whose lives we truly can touch and change. As Helen Keller put it: "I am only one, but still, I am one. I cannot do everything but I can do something. *And, because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do what I can.*"

¹ I am indebted to Tm Keller for this insight.