Word & World
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Faith Healer

To honor the Irish playwright in his eightieth year, the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis just completed a production of Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*. It is a dark and ambitious play, composed of four extended monologues that allow no two actors on the stage at the same time. Frank Hardy (the faith healer), Grace (his wife), Teddy (his manager), and then Frank again tell stories of their life together, focusing on one or two particular events, leaving the audience to wonder whose perspective is correct or even who is telling the truth.

In any case, the truth is not pretty. Friel uses the "faith healer" as a metaphor for the artist or writer or performer, the one brought to center stage, whose gifts separate him from others and take a terrible toll both on him and on those who would be close. Interestingly, not a few clergy and teachers who saw the play noted that it made them reexamine their own lives and ministries, apparently recognizing how tragically the spotlight and the adoration that sometimes come with those vocations can turn people in on themselves, with destructive results. Indeed, one pastor in the audience observed, "This is about us!" The play is worth seeing or reading (seeing is immeasurably better) for that reason alone—not unlike the value of reading Sinclair Lewis's *Elmer Gantry*, though even better and even more disturbing, since Frank Hardy is not portrayed as a charlatan. The problem is the gift itself rather than its abuse.

For this production, the Guthrie and the Minnesota Consortium of Theological Schools cooperated to provide a panel of theologians and health professionals to discuss the play with the audience on two evenings following the performance. Faith healing was the issue of the discussions, even though the "faith healer" in the play is never portrayed as a religious figure or one who uses or induces anything like traditional religious faith. He is a figure of traditional Irish culture, one who heals simply because "he can" and who himself wonders about the source or the object of the "faith" in his title:

> Precisely what power did I possess?…Did it reside in my ability to invest someone with faith in me or did I evoke from him a healing faith in himself? Could my healing be effected without faith? But faith in what?—in me?—in the possibility?—faith in faith?*

The questions evoked by the play can apply equally well to many of the healing stories in the Bible, and Friel does, in fact, play with the biblical material, perhaps most poignantly in Grace's (Frank's wife) anguished cry to him, "Physician,

*Brian Friel, *Faith Healer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980) 4.

heal thyself" (35). The play's most extended allusion to a biblical story is to Luke's account of the healing of the ten men with leprosy (Luke 17:11–19). There are no priests and no religious atmosphere in Friel's play—nor, indeed, are there any with leprosy—but ten people are "fantastically" cured on the same evening and only one offers his thanks (here in the form of money). Given my interest in biblical healing, it was Friel's use of this story that provided the basis for my initial comments as a member of one of the Guthrie panels. Oddly, in the play there is virtually none of the conversation and interaction that take place between Jesus and the ten in the Gospel. Frank just "drifts past" Teddy (his manager), walks among the ten, and they are cured (35–36). Here and elsewhere, the healing that occurs in Frank's presence, when it does (most of the time it does not), is strangely anonymous. Frank enters, and things happen. One wonders if that lack of intimacy might be part of what gives rise to Frank's isolation and obvious lack of satisfaction.

To be sure, there are bizarre healings in the Bible as well. Even the woman with the twelve-year hemorrhage (about whom I write later in this issue) wanted only to touch Jesus anonymously, and she did, but neither the Gospels nor Jesus will leave it at that. Only after personal encounter and conversation does the woman's experience go beyond physical cure to being made "well" in the fullest sense (Mark 5:34).

Essential anonymity remains also with nine of those who come to Jesus with leprosy. They are made "clean," as is the tenth man, but only the one is pronounced "well"—and that only after his own "seeing" what has occurred and his "turning" to Jesus, to an entirely new direction for his life. And he was a Samaritan! That, too, is a dimension not included in Friel's play. Four people get the "your faith has made you well" line from Jesus, and in every case the healing is not merely physical, but functions to bring one who is outcast back into community and acceptance.

What does this mean? My point is not to trump Friel's play with Luke's story. Friel describes a different phenomenon, and the play is both rich and disturbing in its own right. But as the church speaks of anything like "faith healing"—if, indeed, we do well even to use that term—so, better, as the church speaks of healing in Christ (as we do in this issue), we mean not an anonymous (and, therefore, essentially magical) experience, but an encounter that brings one into a healing relationship with Christ and the community of those gathered around him—the community a gift to the one, the one a gift to the community, all together now hearing Christ's word of promise and hope: "Your faith has made you well." Such wellness is what we seek and what Christ offers. Faith healing? Maybe. Better, perhaps, God's healing—however and whenever true healing occurs.

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