

Essentials of Healing

From the very beginning of his public ministry Jesus was known as someone with power to heal. Today, with antibiotics and other remedies, we may forget how fragile life can be when faced with disease; even something as seemingly simple as a fever prompted Peter to ask for Jesus' help.

Years ago, while still a seminary student, I did a chaplaincy internship in a large hospital. One man, who I visited, had various intestinal problems and after surgery one problem after another appeared. He was in the hospital a very long time and in that time I became acquainted with him and his wife. There came a point when his situation looked desperate; his wife was distraught. The doctor was baffled and frustrated, and turned to me, shrugged, and said, "He's in your hands now."

For about two weeks after this I visited the man's bedside several times a week and prayed for him, even though he was mostly sedated and unresponsive. One day his exhausted and desperate wife said to me, "What have we done wrong to deserve all this? Is God punishing us?" I don't know if they were Christians or church-goers, but she expressed what many people feel. Even devout Christians, those who have attempted to sincerely live the Christian life, ask why bad things happen.

Sooner or later most of us are confronted with serious illness or disease or injury. Like that wife of the seriously ill man in the hospital, many of us will wonder if we are being punished for some public misdeed or secret sin. Harboring as we do a deep reservoir of guilt, some of us may feel the justice of God is being visited upon us.

In the popular mind of Jesus' day it was assumed sickness was due to sin. Of the man born blind it was asked whether his or his parents' sin was the cause of his infirmity (John 9). In this lesson from Mark, Jesus shows that healing and forgiveness of sins and casting out of demons are somehow connected. We may not believe in demon possession as the source of illness, yet we ask, how do we go about achieving wholeness, health and healing? Jesus' demonstrates healing and provides a model for a community of healing.

With Simon-Peter's mother-in-law we can understand why Jesus would respond so readily. But he responded as well to all those who came without an appointment. They boldly gathered and waited outside the door. Notice that the friends of the sick cared enough to offer more than consolation; they made effort to bring them before Jesus. Perhaps Jesus responded to their act of faith.

One of the great fears we all have in a time of illness is that of being abandoned, neglected, or forgotten. While many of us may not feel we are being punished for some sin during illness, we may, nevertheless, be ashamed of our weakness and our inability to cope. Confident, independent, and self-sufficient, many of us find it difficult to be in a position where we are weak, helpless, and vulnerable. We know our family and friends enjoy us in our strength, but we wonder if they will stand by us in our weakness. They often have enjoyed the pleasure we have brought them, but now we worry if they will love us when we bring them the burden of pain.

Like the sick of Jesus' day, and like my desperately sick friend, we all need a community of friends to surround us, to support us, and to bring us to good physicians. We need to be assured that we will not be abandoned or forgotten. We need someone to plead our cause during our

weakness. We need someone to bring us before Jesus. That is one essential of healing.

Note further that the friends of the sick people not only cared enough to bring them to the Good Physician. They cared enough to pray on their behalf. They came to Jesus in faith, asking him to heal their friends. I am convinced one reason that man I met in the hospital years ago finally went home, is that someone was praying for him. Medically speaking his illness, and its complications, was still a mystery, despite all the advanced technology and sophisticated techniques. There was another doctor in the hospital there who confided to me that they [doctors] could do so much, but healing was still outside their power.

After several weeks of agony I remember seeing our very ill patient awake and smiling, his wife at his beside, also smiling. He was on the road to recovery. What made the difference for him? Good medicine and expert specialists to be sure. But he and his wife will also tell you that prayer made a difference. In their total exhaustion and bleakest moments, they claim they were sustained by faith and prayer - their own, and the faith and prayer of others when they were too weak to pray for themselves.

I have had many people tell me that. One man told me that when his pastor took his hand to pray for him in the hospital, he could feel the healing power of love flow from the pastor to himself. A member of one of my former churches told me that as she lay in the hospital bed, after a very serious heart attack, she just opened herself to receive the healing power of prayers being said on her behalf. It was as though she were being flooded with the color of deep purple, she reported. She experienced great peace and inner strength, and then knew that she would recover. Another lady told me she didn't know what Christian friends meant until she entered the hospital and they surrounded her with concern and prayer. These, and many others I have known, have been healed because friends have brought them to good physicians and have prayed to the Great Physician. The Church can and should be that kind of healing community. It is praise worthy that this kind of concern, prayer, and community is so evident here, at First Church. Prayer quilts, prayer shawls, a prayer team, those who make visits, all represent the many people and prayers who do so much, so often to bring nurture, comfort, and healing to people around us. In a lonely world we need that kind of concern.

In this story of Jesus and the sick, healing and the forgiveness of sins are associated. It may be that some illnesses are caused by sin. I know that many psychosomatic diseases are caused by fear, guilt or anxiety. Doctors know that a large percentage of their patients have problems of the soul in addition to problems of the body. I am not saying all diseases have psychological origins. But some do, and the healing in such instances will have to deal with the psyche and the soul, as well as the body.

Consequently, when Jesus healed people he often directed his efforts toward the mind and soul of the patient. When he saw the sick, he may have seen people constricted with fear. Perhaps he saw people frozen under the spell of guilt or immobilized by anxiety. He saw others held in bondage and he cast out the demons that held them. Because of the faith of friends, because of the excitement and expectation of the crowd, and because of the penetrating power of Jesus' presence, the sick were assured of release from anything that enslaved them. With His touch they became whole.

For the majority of us, I suppose fear and guilt does not cause bodily illness. More commonly we experience a paralysis of spirit; a bondage of the will. Maybe our arms and legs move, while our personal relationships are frozen. We may be strong in action but impotent to build community.

A community of healing can help us out of our paralysis of will. When surrounded by those who care about us, who want to see us develop, who wish to build us up rather than tear us down, we have a good chance of becoming whole. When we are supported by a believing and caring group, our chances for healthy survival are greatly enhanced. A church can be a caring, loving, helping support group, rather than a stress-causing group. Despite all our claims of independence and self-sufficiency, we really need each other - God made us that way. In mutual love and concern we can bind up wounds and release our souls from disease.

Now, I do not know why some people are healed and others are not. But I do know this: when people receive good medical care and a caring and praying community surrounds them, healing very often occurs. Even if a person dies, they do so knowing that they have not been forgotten, but that they have been loved. For many, that is enough. Love lasts forever, because God made it that way.

And there's the key: God made us to be connected to his great and powerful love. He is the Source of strength for all the prayer, nurture, and comfort we offer. Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches... apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). We are not the healers, but we can assist the One who brings healing, and so we must remain connected to Him. Jesus, the Son of God, did this to keep strong His connection to His heavenly Father. Early in the morning he went out to a place where he could be alone with the One who is the Source for all of us, and there he prayed. We can do no less.