



“Faith and Healing”

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Scripture: Mark 10: 46-52

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She is a 28 year-old mother with a three year-old daughter named Cindy. But Cindy is not a typical little girl who relishes playing with toys and learning to master new words. Her brain never fully developed. As best the doctors can tell, her only sense is that of touch.

She was not expected to live beyond a few weeks. The doctors were astonished that she was alive at birth. Modern medicine has exhausted its possibilities, and the doctors have said there is no hope for any change. They are shocked that she is still alive.

Cindy’s father couldn’t handle it. One morning he left for work and never came home. The young mother struggles. Her parents and friends help out when they can, but there’s not much anyone can do. Numerous prayers have been offered for Cindy, and despite the prognosis, some in their circle of friends pray for a miracle. Is that what our faith beckons us to do?

Similar prayers are uttered every day throughout the world. Many pray for the healing of their loved ones who have been diagnosed with a terminal illness. Hospitals are packed with people begging God to return them to good health. At one time or another, most of us have prayed for the healing of a loved one. And many have tasted the bitter disappointment of our prayers not accomplishing our desired outcome.

I remember as a child, watching television and staring in amazement as Oral Roberts, an Oklahoma faith-healer, supposedly cured people from a variety of ailments. Depressed-looking characters would slowly shuffle up to him, appearing as if they were on the verge of collapsing. He would shout for them to be healed in the name of Jesus as he firmly grabbed their forehead. People would drop their crutches, tears would stream down their faces and they would bounce with elation as they were miraculously healed from their infirmities. The show was fascinating for a ten year-old, but even at that early age I was leery of the spectacle. Was this really the nature of religious healing?

When we pour over the pages of the gospels, we know that healing was a significant part of the ministry of Jesus. There are accounts of Jesus curing lepers, empowering the lame to walk and giving sight to the blind. This morning’s reading from the Gospel of Mark tells one of the stories. Jesus and his disciples are departing Jericho, when a blind beggar, sitting beside the road, causes a commotion. He gets wind that Jesus is walking past, and he shouts in a loud voice, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Those standing nearby attempt to hush him, but that only prompts him to bellow out louder.

And his pleading pays off; Jesus stops in his tracks. “Call him over,” Jesus says, and a buzz runs through the crowd. Someone near the blind man shouts, “It’s your lucky day. He is calling you.” Bartimaeus flings off his coat, springs to his feet, and goes to Jesus. Then, Jesus asks the man, “What do you want me to do for you?”

I have to confess that when I pondered these words a few days ago, my first inclination was sarcasm. It’s obvious what he wants Jesus to do for him. He wants to be able to see. However, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that Jesus’ question was not only for the sake of Bartimaeus. The question is *our* entry point into the text. The question is for each of us. What do you want God to do for you?

Among our members, I can hear numerous answers to that question. Keep my loved ones healthy and safe. Help me to find a job. Cure my friend of his addiction. Bring my loved one back from Afghanistan. Help me pass the test. Keep our marriage from falling apart. Open *my* eyes.

Bartimaeus responds, “Teacher, I want to see.” And Jesus says, “Take off; your faith has made you well.” And the man regains his sight.

It is difficult to know how to interpret the healing miracles in the Bible. In ancient times, numerous stories circulated of individuals who possessed special powers for healing. And in that pre-scientific era, people believed that evil spirits caused most illnesses. Those who could thwart evil spirits could heal. We wonder if some of the stories became exaggerated over time

How do we comprehend the healing stories we find in the Bible? When we study a few of the gospel episodes, we notice that Jesus did not heal everyone in the same manner. He touched some people, but not others. He prayed with some, but not everyone. He healed a man who was paralyzed by forgiving his sins. In today’s story, Jesus did not forgive the man, pray for him or touch him. Instead, he declared that the man’s *faith* had restored his sight.

What is the connection between faith and healing? Some think that God will cure them of any illness as long as they possess an intense faith. Is that true?

Years ago, a good friend, Connie, was diagnosed with cancer. Her illness was not discovered until it had progressed passed the point of cure. She underwent treatments and followed the regimen prescribed by her physician. He explained to her that if she responded well to the treatments, she could hope to have a couple of years. A friend of hers refused to accept the reality of her condition and called in a husband and wife team who claimed to be faith healers. They came to Connie’s house and prayed over her. They said that the devil was in her and that she had to pray to get the devil out. They told her she hadn’t been praying hard enough or sincerely enough, otherwise, she would get well. As a result, in addition to her cancer, she had the added the burden of guilt. They claimed that God intends to heal us, but if we do not get well, it’s our fault.

Is there a connection between faith and healing?

You may know someone like Herb. I visited him in the hospital the day after he passed out and was rushed to the hospital. Herb was in his late seventies and had been diagnosed with lung cancer. While very sad, it was not surprising. Herb had smoked cigarettes for more than 50 years. Yet Herb acted totally shocked by the diagnosis and pleaded with me. His first question was “Why did God give me cancer?” And, then, several times during my visit he asked, “Why is God punishing me?”

Sometimes we play a direct role in our physical maladies. We smoke or we eat too much or drink too much or engage in risky behavior. Other times, our illness is the result of bad genes or invisible bacteria or the environment or bad luck or who knows what. However, the God revealed by Christ does not relish in punishing us. Time after time, Jesus made clear that the one undeniable characteristic of God is that God is loving. God cares for us and wants the best for us.

What Herb was really saying was “Even though I have abused my body for 50 years, I don’t see why God won’t heal me now.” There are times when we become desperate, that we wish God had not designed the world in such a way that there are consequences to our choices. Freedom gives life vitality and meaning. Without it, we would be mere pawns on God’s great chess board. But freedom comes with responsibility. We cannot make bad choices and then whistle for God to snatch us out of our predicament.

Is there no connection between faith and healing?

I believe there is a connection, but it’s not as simple as praying the right words in order to coax God into supernaturally healing us. God’s healing power working within our bodies is truly remarkable. Over the course of our lifetimes, we contract countless illnesses, and we get over them. We break our bones and they mend. We cut ourselves and our blood vessels constrict and blood platelets accumulate to form a clot. As the clotted blood dehydrates it forms a scab. Cells rush to the wound and create new tissue. Eventually the skin heals. Amazing.

And, yet, whatever we believe about God’s healing power, we must take into account one undeniable, unalterable and extremely unpleasant fact: we are all going to die of something. Even if we beat the odds and overcome a life-threatening illness, the reprieve is only temporary. No one on earth lives forever. As one writer quipped, “Everyone on this bus is terminal.” We are healed from numerous cuts, breaks and illnesses during our lifetimes, but the last one is going to get us.

Yet even with this fact in mind, I firmly believe that our faith plays a significant role in our health. You and I are more than physical beings. We are an integrated whole of body, mind and spirit. That’s why the word “wholeness” is coupled with health. To be truly healthy, we must be well in our entire being. Body, mind and spirit exert constant influences on one another. Emotional stress can have a devastating affect on our physical health. Stress is linked to heart attacks, stomach problems, even cancer. Anxiety and depression also have a negative impact on our physical well-being and can produce a number of ailments.

But while a troubled spirit can produce illness, a healthy spirit can promote healing. For centuries, religious people claimed that prayer can heal. In the modern age, many doubts arose, but over the past 20 years a number of controlled scientific studies have demonstrated a connection between faith and healing.

Dr. Harold Koenig, a family physician at the Duke University Medical Center, wondered about the connection between faith and physical healing. It seemed to him that many of his patients, who had the best recoveries, were the ones he noticed reading Scripture or praying. He conducted a study that suggests that people who pray or meditate live longer than those who don’t. The Duke team studied 4,000 older adults and found that healthy seniors who said they rarely or never prayed ran a 50 percent greater risk of dying during the study, than those who prayed or meditated.¹

Physician Gwen Halaas notes that today many healthcare practitioners recognize a connection between faith and healing. She points to decades of studies that have produced striking findings. For instance, people who regularly attend religious services have lower rates of illness than people who attend infrequently or not at all. People who have an active religious life have lower rates of heart disease, cancer and high blood pressure. Older adults who attend religious activities regularly have lower rates of depression, anxiety and dementia. And a confirmation of something that I thought I had noticed over the years: actively religious people live longer on average than people who are not religious.²

What we don’t know is how it works or why it sometimes does not work. But there are studies that show what people from different cultures and different religions have said for centuries: faith can assist the body in the healing process.

Henry Mitchell tells of the time when his wife narrowly survived a dangerous infection. She hovered near the brink of death for several days, and then very gradually her situation improved and she recovered. Once she was out of danger, but still in the hospital, Mitchell and his wife expressed their gratitude to their physician for all he had done. His response surprised them. He said, "First of all, thank God. Then thank your friends for their fervent prayers. Then maybe I come in somewhere down the line." They thought he was being unduly modest, but he responded, "We doctors don't heal anyone. We may be effective in removing obstacles to healing, such as infections, but the actual healing process is beyond our control."³

It would be false to claim that if you have enough faith you will always get well, because one of the unrelenting laws of the universe is that everything perishes. But, I still believe there is a powerful connection between faith and healing. I do not clearly understand it and I know it can be abused, but I believe faith can rally our body's processes for healing and sometimes it is the vital difference between health and illness.

And even in those end-of-life situations where physical healing does not occur, faith can heal emotional scars and spiritual fears. Faith can produce within us a deep, healing peace that assures us that neither heart attacks nor diabetes nor cancer nor strokes nor depression nor accidents can separate us from the love of God.

NOTES

1. From an article written by Kathleen Fackelmann that appeared in *USA Today* in July 2000.
2. Gwen Wagstrom Halaas, "Faith and Health," from the *Alban Weekly* (July 31, 2006), a newsletter produced by the Alban Institute in Washington, D.C. summarizing findings found in Jeff Levin, *God, Faith and Health: Exploring the Spirituality-Healing Connection* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2001).
3. An article by Henry Mitchell entitled "Faith and Healing: A Personal Perspective," in *The Living Pulpit*, (April-June, 1997), p.6.