

You Asked for It: What Is Spiritual Healing?
A Sermon by Louise F. Westfall
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Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Mark 6:7-13

Whenever I visit someone who is a hospital patient, it's my usual practice to ask if I might pray. Most people appreciate this, and over the years many have remarked how the conscious invocation of God calmed and encouraged them and brought a measure of peace in a time of pain and anxiety. One visit to a gentleman who was a member in a church I formerly served stands out in my mind, however, in marked contrast. He had a serious illness and was facing surgery. After we had visited for a few minutes, I offered to pray. "No, don't," he said with surprising vigor. "I don't believe God works that way. I'll take my chances with medical science. But I'd love it if you'd stay a little longer and talk to me."

The church member's comment highlights in one fell swoop both the problem and promise of spiritual healing. The Church affirms God's care for people in all circumstances. We believe God desires health and wholeness, and that includes the condition of our bodies as well as the state of our souls. But do our prayers for healing somehow affect the course and outcome of illness, or change the consequences of injury? How we answer that is important, because it's only a short step from affirming God's intervention to heal, and saying the opposite: that God willfully chooses not to heal. Some people are not cured of disease. Some die from accidents and injuries, even though prayers are fervently made for their healing. Why? Are they somehow morally suspect, or lacking in faith? Did they not pray "hard enough?" Did they not deserve God's favor?

When we turn to the Bible, we find multiple perspectives on spiritual healing, even as it makes some unequivocal claims. In that pre-scientific age, health was viewed as a blessing;

illness a sign of punishment for evil deeds. Disease itself was often attributed to demon possession, and healing as exorcism. The moral dimension of health and sickness was reinforced by assigning healing power to God's prophets and leaders. But even then, biblical people observed a lack of correspondence between behavior and health. Good people were afflicted and rotten people lived to a ripe old age with nary an ache. Remember the story of Job, a brilliant literary work discussing why the righteous suffer? Job's friends come to visit him in his misery and beg him to search his soul, repent and be healed. Though the friends' arguments are portrayed as inadequate, the story doesn't really answer the question except to say that God is greater than any human picture of God. God's ways and means remain mysterious. The strongest biblical refutation of the illness-as-punishment perspective comes from Jesus. His disciples observe a man known to have been blind from birth, and they ask Jesus whose sin is responsible for his condition. No one, Jesus responds, and then proceeds to heal his blindness. I considered using that text for today's requested topic, or another example of Jesus' healing work, comprising fully one-third of the gospel accounts of his earthly ministry. It's clear that Jesus had deep compassion for human suffering and felt called to relieve it. Instead, I chose one in which Jesus sends his disciples on a mission of preaching and healing, because I believe it is the contemporary church's calling as well. Listen for God's word in the reading from the gospel according to Mark, in the sixth chapter at the seventh verse. [MARK 6:7-13]

One of the Presbyterian Church's best-kept secrets is the Service for Healing and Wholeness, worship specifically intended to demonstrate our theological conviction that God wills health—including physical health and freedom from pain—for all people. Scripture is read, silent and spoken prayers are offered, and if desired, individuals may receive a small drop of oil on the forehead, an ancient ritual symbolizing God's grace and blessing. At Fairmount, we include this service during Evening prayer on the first Wednesday each month. At each Sunday worship service, we pray by name for

individuals who are hospitalized (and who have given us permission to do so). The bulletin lists “prayer concerns” and invites you to share additional ones with the pastoral staff. Each of these practices offers clues to answer the question “What is spiritual healing?”

Maybe you’ve thought about that question more from the standpoint of what it is *not*. Spiritual healing does not depend upon a denial of disease. Nor is it reliant upon a positive mental attitude, as if one can think one’s way to health. It’s not psychological manipulation; it’s not new age whoo-who and it’s not voodoo. You’ll never hear the church promise to cure your maladies (provided you send in your pledge on time!). Spiritual healing instead is applying God’s power to produce well-being, including cure from disease, restored balance and peace.

But I don’t think we can talk responsibly or faithfully about healing without speaking of the intersection of spirituality and science. Health is more than the absence of disease, and salvation is more than heaven after we die. There may be far more common ground between them than we imagine if we don’t define either of them too narrowly. In fact, I’m not sure we should even designate between “spiritual healing” and “medical healing”—both are concerned with restoring a person to his or her created goodness. To effect healing, we can use prayer, medical arts, scientific knowledge and faith.

To broaden and deepen our perspective, I invited a number of Fairmount physicians to share their views: persons committed to the practice of medicine and of Christian faith. I asked them to comment on the junction of spiritual healing and medical arts. Do they complement each other? Are they different channels of God’s grace? Does prayer make a difference in the outcome of surgery or the course of disease? Have they witnessed “miraculous” healings—ones that medical science could not explain?

Though they expressed a range of perspectives, each acknowledged the value of belief in the healing process. One said the two work closely as “hand and glove.” She added that she prays each day before work that she may be an instrument of God’s healing grace. Another affirmed “the power of belief itself is strong and I do believe there are physiologic benefits and actual changes that are difficult to measure related just to believing in a good outcome....perhaps derived from reduced worry and anxiety.” I was somewhat surprised that each of the doctors had seen cures and outcomes in patients that could not be explained by medicine or the behavioral sciences, which they were willing to attribute to divine intervention. One remarked however, “I prefer to focus primarily on the daily, routine “miracles” that occur when doctors and nurses and chaplains and social workers do their expert best, and God works through them to bring about healing.”

Several of the doctors were also critical of their profession when its contemporary practices discredit anything outside the measurable physical world and what can be measured, quantified, analyzed, proscribed and predicted—what one called “evidence-based medicine.” A Clinic doctor invited comment from colleagues involved in pastoral care who cited reputable studies with contradictory conclusions: one showing improved healing among patients with AIDS who were prayed for, even when they were not aware of it; the other a recent one from Duke showing that patients in a cardiology study did worse when they knew they were being prayed for than the control group. Neither chaplain nor physician was troubled by these studies, nor did they believe research conclusively proved that prayer “works” or not. They welcomed the conversation as a way of strengthening both spirituality and medicine: by opening the door wider to spirituality amid over-taxed health care, and by correcting theology that imagines it can control God. I am very grateful for the insights of these doctors, and am glad that they reflect the very best of medical professionals serving the health of our community.

Fact is, human beings are not simply bodies who are healthy if all their parts work correctly. We have minds and spirits which likewise need attention. A synonym for health is “wholeness” which speaks volumes about the need to have our individual parts—body, mind, and spirit—integrated and fully engaged. You simply can’t have “your best life now” simply through diet and exercise. Spiritual healing involves addressing the needs of the whole person, wherever there is “dis-ease”—wherever there is fear, tension, unresolved issues, guilt, estrangement—anything that separates us from God, from others, from our truest selves. The Hebrew word for “peace” is “shalom.” Far richer than simply the absence of warfare and conflict, “shalom” includes abundance, well-being, joy, delight, harmony in the created order, appreciation for life itself. Shalom is salvation, God’s kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven.”

And I think the idea of “shalom” helps us better than anything to understand the goal of spiritual healing. It may involve cure of disease; in fact, that may be the presenting request and the fervent hope. But spiritual healing intends far more than that, as it seeks the health of the whole person. Sometimes, it is possible to be healed without being cured. *Plain Dealer* columnist Phillip Morris recently told about the speech Dr. Edgar Jackson gave to the incoming medical students at Case Western Reserve University. Dr. Jackson is the former chief of staff at University Hospitals and, as the first African-American to hold the position of professor of clinical medicine at Case, is one of its most accomplished alums. His speech urged the medical students to make spiritual connections, illustrated by a personal story of caring for a friend who was terminally ill with lung cancer. One day he walked into her room and knew death was imminent. Her eyes were wide with fear as she labored for each breath. Jackson sat on the edge of the bed, gently took her hand and began to sing an old gospel hymn: *Jesus, keep me near the cross, there’s a precious fountain, free to all, a healing stream, flows from Calvary’s mountain.* Her fears subsided. Her breath flowed easier. She looked her friend in the eye and said, “I’m ready to go meet Jesus.” She died within the hour. [related in the *Plain Dealer*, July 17, 2007] Would any disagree that she experienced healing?

The Fairmount members who requested this topic are interested in taking it further and would love for others to join them in study and exploration.

At the heart of healing lies humility: acknowledgement that there is so much we don't know! Our best medical knowledge is limited. And who would claim to understand the depths of the human heart? What we do know is that each person is a beloved child of God. Spiritual healing tries to help individuals understand who they are, and to experience perhaps for the first time, the unconditional love and grace of God, the source of all healing. Hope will not disappoint us if we put our trust finally not in human powers, considerable though they be, but in God's.

Amazingly, that divine power is mediated through humanity. A couple years ago I was briefly hospitalized for an infection perhaps brought on by food poisoning (I haven't been back to Taco Bell since!). For 24 hours I was uncomfortable and anxious, and wasn't allowed pain medication until certain tests were performed. What set me on a path of healing (even before the assuring words of a clean bill of health from the doctors) were visits from some of you. You didn't talk much; no one offered to pray aloud. It was your presence that reminded me that I was not alone. There were friends and prayers and caring. There was God. I think the church member who refused prayer before surgery but asked me to stay and visit may have been saying the same thing. The church engages in spiritual healing not only when it prays, but also when it embodies those prayers with caring human hands and hearts and minds.

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS FOREVERMORE! AMEN.

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