

*"If Any of You are Sick"*

*Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50*

*September 27, 2015*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Connecticut*

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Today's worship is focused on healing ministry. We typically offer prayer and healing anointing the last Sunday of each month. It happens that today the lectionary reading from the apostle James speaks directly to this practice in the early church which is the basis of what we do. The verses of today's special music also reflect on this theme, drawing on this scripture using a poignant tune from a Handel opera.

I've often said there's no place I'd rather be than America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for medical care. Still, there are answers that escape the best that modern medicine offers. Dr. Bernie Siegel has done for the relationship between medicine and spirituality what Dr. Sydney Blanton and Dr. Norman Vincent Peale did for the relationship between psychoanalysis and spirituality in the 1930's. That is, two disciplines that seem at odds were brought together, to everyone's benefit.

From time to time studies appear linking prayer to better overall health. Despite our tendency to dismiss these as one more example of public opinion polls, such research has a long history. In their book, Body, Mind and Spirit, authors Elwood Worcester and Samuel McComb said this in 1931:

*It is now an ascertained fact that, other things being equal, the sick person who prays for himself and has others pray for him has a better chance of recovery than he who refuses the hope and stimulus that prayer can bestow. Through prayer we are united to God, and this union means increase of comfort and peace, which in turn help on the process of Nature's healing virtue. (1)*

(1) Body, Mind and Spirit (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1931, p. 308

Let us be clear at the outset that “curing” and “healing” are slightly different. “Cure,” as defined and as most of us understand it, is a permanent alleviation of a harmful or troublesome, usually physical, situation. “Heal” involves restoration to a sound state, which may or may not involve physical curing. One person has observed that death is the ultimate healing. Indeed, one of the New Testament words, *soza*, that we translate “heal”, also means “saved.” So the healing for which prayers is offered here and in our churches includes both a yearning for physical cure and the hope of a sound state in body, mind and spirit.

For some of us, the struggle to believe in the power of prayer to effect healing is found in Mark 9, where the man whose son is about to be healed cries out “*Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.*” At the end of that same story, the disciples expressed their frustration to Jesus in their inability to cure the boy: “*Why could we not cast out the demon?*” they asked Jesus. Jesus answered, “*This kind can come out only through prayer.*”

A broader view of Jesus’ ministry makes it clear that illness, or disaster or any adversity, for that matter, is not a sign of God’s punishment or disfavor. As close as he ever gets to suggesting illness is related to sin is when he says, in several instances, “Your faith has made you well; go and sin no more.” We know that there are some times when illness is related to self-destructive behavior, and that confessing and changing that behavior is key to both curing and healing.

But there are other places where Jesus is quite clear that injury and illness are in no way connected to bad behavior. In one place he says “God causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.” In Luke 13 he responds to those trying to make sense of the assassination of religious pilgrims in the temple by the Roman governor Pilate. His rhetorical question to his

audience was *“Do you think that because the Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”* That is, people suffering from adversity—refugees in Europe, victims of the 9/11 attacks, some sufferers of AIDS, cancer or other chronic conditions—are no better or worse than any of us. All of us, because we all need healing—salvation—in some must repent: turn away from ungodliness and toward God.

The Pope’s recent visit to the United States and his particular attention to climate change made me wonder about James’ reference to Elijah’s prayer that brought a drought for three and one-half years. If you are holy enough, can you do this? It is a self-fulfilling prophecy, of course. If you or I pray for rain or anything else, and it doesn’t occur, the usual conclusion is that we or the prayer weren’t holy enough. It is rare that we might consider the prayer was just wrong.

Yet modern understandings of how nature works has changed what we expect of prayer, even though I get asked to pray for good weather and blamed when it isn’t produced! There is still a part of us that wants to control events, including curing, with prayer. In his book *A Rustic Moralist*, William Inge points out the inconsistency in this view of prayer:

*“If we think that we should like to control events by our prayers, let us consider how we should like the idea of our neighbor being able to control them by his. I once had a letter from a good lady who said, ‘I am praying for your death. I have been very successful in two other cases.’...Providence does not begin where nature leaves off. Things are not specially ‘providential’ because they suit our convenience...if the order of nature is not broken by so-called supernatural interventions, the probable reason is that the Author of nature is satisfied with the regular operations of His own laws.”* (2)

(2) *A Rustic Moralist* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1937, pp. 78-80)

So if prayer doesn't work like a vending machine—put the prayer in and get the product out—how does it work? One observer notes: “The one who rises from their knees a better person has had their prayer answered.” That “better person” is achieved, Christians believe, because of the the elevation of the mind (or soul) to God. Another way prayer works is as “conversation with God.” We know how annoyed with get with people who only talk to us when they want something from us. Why would we think God is any different? Cultivating a relationship with God and, as St. Paul phrased it, “the mind of Christ” within us is how prayer works, not just asking for favors, curing or relief. Indeed, prayer does not relieve us from all suffering, as Jesus knew well when he prayed *“Lord, if it be possible let this cup pass from me; yet not my will, but thine, be done.”*

And when we ask others to pray for us, we fulfill the Galatians 6:2, which I memorized long ago in the King James' Version: *“Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.”* We cannot bear another's burden unless they entrust it to us; and we cannot have our burden's borne unless we trust others enough to share it with them. This kind of sharing creates a sustainable community and a sustainable healing. It is rooted in the very presence of Jesus Christ, the Great Physician. Here's how we say it every month in the liturgy, describing prayer and healing anointing: *“This ancient church practice expresses God's love as a mysterious, caring expression of Christ's promise ‘I will be with you always.’”*

So, paraphrasing today's Epistle, “If any of you are sick...have [the elders] of the church pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord.” Let whoever desires come and leave your burdens at the altar of the Lord.