

To Be Healed
Mark 1:29-39

There is healing to be done!
Jesus walks into a house and heals one who is sick.
And then a whole city arrives at the door for healing of disease and casting out of demons.

A whole city! And in the morning they seek him still.
So Jesus moves on to the next town to do the same.

This is chapter 1 of Mark's gospel. In last week's reading Jesus exorcised a demon in the synagogue. Later in this same chapter we read about a leper.

In Mark chapter 2 there is a paralytic.

Chapter 3 begins with healing of a man with a withered hand and moves to yet more demons – Jesus, recognizing the great need, then appoints the 12 apostles to preach and cast out demons with him.

In chapter 5 Jesus encounters one called the “Gerasene Demoniac” – healed. Still in chapter 5 there is a daughter, dead and being mourned, raised to life by a touch the words, “little girl, get up”; and a woman hemorrhaging for 12 years who touches Jesus' clothes and is healed by her faith.

Mark 6 tells of Jesus again commissioning the disciples and states “they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them”¹.

Healing continues throughout Mark's gospel, even to what scholars call the “longer ending” of Mark where the addition reads, “and these signs shall accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons....”²



There remains much healing to be done.
We hear the needs each week in our prayers of the people: cancer and heart disease, accidents and mental illness.
These past couple of weeks Fort Collins has experienced THREE completed or attempted suicides (and those are only the ones that made the paper).

Where are the healers when we need them?

That's only one of my questions...



- What is healing?
- Does healing essentially mean removal of physical and mental ills?
- Or do we understand healing in the holistic sense: as the restoration of bodily wholeness, emotional well-being, mental functioning, and spiritual aliveness?
What are demons and where do they fit in?
- Did Jesus *really* heal people and bring them back to life? Did his disciples? Did the early church followers and the saints?
Are these metaphysical or metaphorical stories?
- If metaphorical, do we, then, seek from our faith only healing of our spirits, and leave the physical to secular means?
- If healing of the body and mind were genuine gifts given to early Christians, can healing still be a gift of the Spirit today?

- If such healing *is* still a gift, does that mean there really are some faith healers in our world right now? And how can we distinguish them from those who would deceive us?
Where do reiki and reflexology and other modalities of healing touch fit in...or do they?
- Are the scientific studies which show a correlation between prayer and healing valid? Or is prayer a placebo? Can we really test prayer and healing in a scientific way?
- If such healing is possible, *why are many of us not healed even when we possess great faith?*

I could talk about this subject every Sunday for years – and these questions would draw still more questions. Where do we begin?



In parts of the Old Testament health was viewed as a blessing from God, and illness a punishment. While we like to think we've transcended such punitive ideas, many people continue to use a telling phrase, a phrase we use when we encounter a person struck by something we deem unfortunate: "But for the grace of God, there go I". But for the grace of God...

One of my seminary professors shared her experience of hearing these words spoken by a stranger while she was having a seizure in a public place.

Was she lacking the grace of God in her disease? Most who knew her would answer with a resounding no – but there may be times when any of us wonder if we fare better because we've deserved better, or if we suffer because of some shadow within.

The New Testament reveals a different vision of illness. Jesus' healing ministry in ALL of the gospels demonstrates God's love for people despite

their gratefulness (9 out of 10 lepers offer no thanks for healing³)

or their occupation (tax collectors and prostitutes followed him⁴)

or their sinfulness (the adulterer at the well asks for living water⁵)

or their religious affiliation (Jesus exorcises a demon from the Syrophenician Gentile's daughter⁶).

Jesus and the disciples offered healing to all: No one was left out.

In the early church healing ministry was central to worship and mission. Anointing of the sick for healing only changed to anointing as the Last Rites in the middle ages. And the Roman Catholic Church has returned to that original practice by renaming Last Rites as the Sacrament of the Sick.

Monastic orders of healers and hospital caregivers go back to the beginning of such religious communities, so even though the physical body eventually became lesser than the "soul" in later teaching, healing has always been connected to Christian life and practice.



So what do *we* as Christians believe about healing?

Seemingly we view prayer as having some beneficial quality, or we wouldn't open ourselves to such needs each week.

Members of our congregation have taken part in a laying on of hands – a healing service where we focus our thoughts and love on one in need, and then offer those prayers physically through touch. Not only is there intense prayer of mind and emotion and spirit – but there is also body, the physical piece through which we as humans come to know God. In combining all aspects of what we are, the person being prayed for knows she is loved by community, by life, by the Spirit.

Our own *UCC Book of Worship* provides 2 different Orders for the Laying on of Hands. Two different healing services!

It makes me wonder, if evidence has shown that infants who receive more touch develop better, why should adults need any less?⁷

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So, is prayer practical?

Does an interceding God act on our requests?

Does the energy of our thoughts or meditation enter the Universal One and affect the energy of those we pray for?

Does knowing that others are “pulling for us” affect our psyches in such a way that we strive harder to overcome bodily injury?

And if we don’t get well, have we done something wrong?

Is God saying “no”?

Two years ago my cousin’s 12 year old daughter died of a brain tumor – even though her family prayed and were SURE she would be cured through their faith.

Was God not listening? Or did she not have the right healer?

Again, 2 years ago, doctors told my father that he’d be taking 7 or more heart medications for the rest of his life. Then he visited a healer-friend who touched him, and he returned to his shocked doctor, who immediately cancelled 3 of the medications, and decreased the doses of the remaining 4.

What explanation can he give? He didn’t really *believe* it could happen, he just *wanted* it to. And most of us want things for ourselves and those we love.

How do we explain healing and its lack?

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In her autobiography, Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy speaks of an injury “that neither medicine nor surgery could reach”⁸. Near death, she asked for her Bible and opened to a healing story in Matthew. Eddy studied the passage, and suddenly found herself healed. She states that she “could only assure [her physician] that the divine Spirit had wrought the miracle – a miracle which later [she] found to be in perfect scientific accord with divine law”⁹.

Eddy then discovered that she could not only heal herself and others, but she could teach others to heal as well. And so a church was formed to support this healing mission.

Eddy couldn’t, at first, explain the healing – but she believed in it. Eventually she came to believe that healing is a natural result of drawing closer to God.

So – I ask again...does that mean you and I are far from the Holy One?

Some do believe that the closer we come to truly walking in and with the Spirit, the closer we come to health and wholeness. And I see the draw to such thinking – that if I strive for wholeness in all, then I won’t get the flu that’s going around. ...but then life’s occurrences shatter that belief once more.

For example:

I am a person who believes that the Divine offers many paths to reach and become one with God – that the Spirit desires all of us to strive for that Wholeness.

And the Buddha is one who I consider to be a great spiritual master – living the teachings of the Christ even though Jesus arrived about 4 centuries after Buddha’s death. I trust he was an enlightened one close to God’s ways, and yet he died of illness – food poisoning.

So much for that theory. And really, isn’t this “the holy ones will be well” just a newer restating of the Old Testament retribution concept that we’ve tried to shake off?

John’s gospel offers an answer to that mindset once and for all with Jesus’ response to the disciples’ question: “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”¹⁰

Neither. “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind that God’s works might be revealed in him”¹¹.

Healing is a work of God – and even though this response brings up more questions than answers, it does offer us hope.

Healing is a work of revealing God – in whatever form it takes.

The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke shares some wisdom on the subject in his *Letters to a Young Poet*.

So you must not be frightened...if a sadness rises up before you larger than any you have ever seen; if a restiveness, like light and cloud-shadows, passes over your hands and all you do. You must think that...life has not forgotten you, that it holds you in its hand; it will not let you fall. Why do you want to shut out of your life any agitation, any pain, any melancholy, since you really do not know what these states are working upon you? Why do you want to persecute yourself with the question whence all this may be coming and wither it is bound? ...just remember that sickness is the means by which an organism frees itself of foreign matter; so one must just help it to be sick, to have its whole sickness and break out with it, for that is its progress.”¹²

Sickness, in itself, can be healing. And healing reveals God.

The onset of heart disease can make us change our eating habits, become more active, release our stress.

A frightening diagnosis can open us to looking at where we have come from and where we long to go before this life ends.

The changes of our physical selves can lead us to new ways of being and doing and offering God to others.

What is it that will heal you?

Is it a friend who joins with you to lay on hands and show how much he cares?

Is it a healer who, believing she can work miracles in our everyday lives, opens you to new faith?

Is it western medicine’s endeavor to know the detailed workings of these marvelous bodies we’ve been given?

Is it letting go of the “why” and “how”, and being with our bodies as they are and loving them as a gift from God – not to punish or teach...but to be?

There is much healing to be done – there always has and will be.

But there is hope.

Through Christ who is the great physician, we are healers.

And we are called to reveal God in our healing.

May it be so.

¹ Mark 6:13.

² Mark 16:17.

³ Luke 17:11-19.

⁴ Luke 15:1-2.

⁵ John 4:16-26.

⁶ Mark 7:25-30.

⁷ Sharon Heller, developmental psychologist, tells us that "Touch is not an emotional fringe benefit for infants. It's as necessary as the air they breathe." Sharon Heller, Ph.D, *The Vital Touch* (New York: Henry Hold, 1997). See also *Reach Out and Touch Someone: Massage in Schools* (http://www.connectionparenting.com/parenting_articles/reach.html).

⁸ Mary Baker Eddy, *Retrospection and Introspection*, 24:12.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ John 9:2.

¹¹ John 9:3.

¹² Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. By M.D. Herter Norton (New York: W.W. Norton, 1934) 69-70.