

## UNFINISHED HEALING

Scriptures: Mark 1:29-34, James 5:13-16

We don't have cable TV at our house, but one night as I was cycling through the channels we get on old fashioned antenna, I came upon a channel I had never seen before. Apparently it was a Christian broadcasting channel. The screen showed an evangelist with slicked back hair conducting a healing service in a large auditorium. People from all over the auditorium were streaming down the aisles. When they got to the stage the minister would sweep his arms at them and say something I could not understand, and suddenly they would all fall down like bowling pins, each row collapsing on the ones behind them. How this healed people, I don't know, but all over the auditorium people were raising their hands and singing and crying for joy as the ushers began collecting their money.

I could tell they weren't Presbyterians. Presbyterians have never been big on healing services, and I can see why. The tendency of such services toward emotionalism, extravagance, magical thinking, and in some cases outright fraud is more than most Presbyterians can stomach.

But you know, you cannot read the New Testament without encountering healing. Healing was one of the most frequent things Jesus did in his ministry. And he commanded his disciples to do the same. In our first scripture reading the book of James says, "Are any among you sick? They should call the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord."

John Calvin, the founder of Presbyterians, was suspicious of anything that smacked of theatrics. He believed in very plain worship services. If something wasn't called for in the Bible, he left it out. But anointing with oil was right there in the Bible, so he left it in. Today in our Presbyterian Book of Common Worship, there is a section on healing services. We don't call them healing services. That term has too much negative baggage. We call it a Service of Wholeness. There are no people passing out on the floor or rolling on the ground barking like dogs. We think God is better served when people are conscious and have their wits about them. Nevertheless, there is a suggested service in the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship inviting people to come forward and receive anointing with oil and prayer. The pastors or elders dip their thumbs in a little bit of oil and make the sign of the cross on a person's forehead while offering a short prayer for his or her particular need. It is kind of like what we do on Ash Wednesday when people come forward to receive the sign of the cross marked on their foreheads with ashes.

But here is the problem with services of healing. Why are some people healed and some not? That is the real question. I have no problem anointing people with oil and praying for them. But what do I tell them when they go home and nothing has changed?

That issue is raised even in today's scripture reading. In Mark 1:32-34 it says, "That evening, at sundown, they brought to (Jesus) all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons." You notice it does not say he healed them all. It does not say that he got rid of all the demons. He healed many.

As several Bible commentators have pointed out, this does not mean there are some people that Jesus could not heal. There is no disease, no infirmity, no brokenness in our lives that is beyond God's power to heal. But the fact is that during his life Jesus did not heal everyone. We know this because the next day an even larger crowd gathered at Jesus door and Jesus told them, "Sorry, I have to go preach in other towns." There are many people who went home that day without healing. Why does Jesus heal some and not others?

This is an issue in our own church. Here in this sanctuary we have prayed for many people with cancer or other serious illnesses. Some of them have been healed and some have not. Some have died, and we have mourned their loss. Others are still waiting to see what happens. Why are some healed and some not?

Occasionally it is suggested that people are not healed because of a lack of faith, either by themselves or by the person who is doing the praying. But what about the apostle Paul? The apostle Paul had some kind of debilitating illness. We don't know what it was, but in II Corinthians 12:8 he says, "Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me." But it didn't. Did Paul lack faith? Or Job who was afflicted with boils and sores, not to mention the death of his children? Or Jesus who died on a cross crying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Did these people lack faith?

I don't think so. Even in the Bible some are healed and some are not. But the failure to be healed is not a sign that the person lacked faith. It is a sign that God is not finished yet. It is a sign that God has more yet to accomplish in our lives and world.

Which means that healing in this life is never complete. The healing that any of us experiences in this life is at best provisional. It is a sign of the true healing that is yet to come. In I Corinthians 15 the apostle Paul says, "This perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. Then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up on victory.'"

That is when the final healing will take place—in the resurrection. In the meantime, what we experience in this life is provisional healing, a sign of the final healing that is yet to come.

So where does that leave us? It means that we are to make our lives a witness to God's final healing even while we wait for it. In this life we bear witness to the final healing that will come in God's kingdom. And that is where prayer comes in, and anointing with oil.

At this point turn back with me to James 5:14-15 (NT, p. 231). Verse 14 starts out, "Are any among you sick?" The Greek word translated sick literally means "weak." It refers to any kind of weakness. In Romans 14 the apostle Paul says, "Welcome the weak in faith," using the same Greek word translated "sick" in James 5. The Bible invites us to pray for any kind of weakness: physical, emotional, or spiritual.

The same point is made again in verse 15. James says, "And the prayer of faith will save the sick." This time he uses a different Greek word that means not just sick but tired. You don't

have to be ill to need prayer. Prayer can help even if you are weary, even if you are simply tired of the struggle.

But notice carefully what this verse says. It does not say the prayer of faith will heal you. It says the prayer of faith will save the sick or weary, and the Lord will raise them up. Here James uses the same Greek expression that is used frequently in the New Testament for raising Jesus from the dead.

It all gets back to what I was saying before. The final healing for all of us will happen at the resurrection. But in the meantime we pray for one another and anoint one another with oil as a sign that God is not finished with us yet. And sometimes God does surprising things with that sign.

Tony Campolo, a Christian sociology professor, tells about one day giving a lecture at a Midwestern college on the intellectual integrity of the Christian faith. At the end of the talk a woman came up to him caring a child with braces on his legs. The woman said to Campolo, “God told me to come. You are supposed to heal my child.” Campolo said he was flabbergasted. He said he felt like pointing to his bald head and saying, “Lady, if I could heal would I look like this.” But instead he said, “Dear lady, I don’t have the gift of healing. ... My gift is teaching.”

But the woman would not go away. She repeated, “God told me to come.” At that point the college chaplain said to Campolo, “Let’s take the child out back to the kitchen. We’re going to anoint his head with oil.” “Oil?” Campolo said. “What kind of oil?” “Del Monte,” the chaplain replied. So they took the child and his mother back to the kitchen, anointed the child’s head with oil, and prayed for his healing. But nothing happened. The child went home in the same condition that he came.

Three years later Campolo was a guest preacher at a church in St. Louis. After the service a woman came up to him and said, “Do you remember me?” “Yes,” said Campolo. “You brought you little boy for healing. We prayed for him? How is he doing?” She said, “Here he is.” And there standing beside her straight and tall was the boy with no braces on his legs (*It’s Friday, but Sunday is Coming*, pp. 75-79).

There is nothing magic about the oil, Del Monte or any other brand. But when you receive it with prayer and faith it becomes a sign. It is a sign that God is not finished with you yet and won’t be until you are made completely whole.

- Ken Onstot